

# HOW ARE CONSUMERS INFLUENCED BY GENDER STEREOTYPES OF FOOD ADVERTISEMENTS?

## *HOGYAN BEFOLYÁSOLJÁK AZ ÉLELMISZER REKLÁMOKBAN ALKALMAZOTT NEMI SZTEREOTÍPIÁK A FOGYASZTÓKAT?*

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims at analyzing the stereotype of certain foods being associated with gender. It discusses how consumers are influenced by gender-specific food marketing. Food is gender-neutral, however, what we consume is heavily gendered. Food advertisers have conditioned us to think that salad is for women and steak is for men. Commercials have resulted in gender-segregated eating culture and bias in gender role distribution. If we really realize it, food advertising influences our choices and preference of food. It affects our role in the society telling us how to act and what to eat. This paper is developed based on a review of the literature on how food industries in developed countries use product package and advertisings (mostly commercials) as a tool to target their market and influence consumers' preference of foods in relation to gender. Based on the analysis it was concluded that no matter how gender-neutral food is, advertisers brainwash consumers into thinking that food is gender-segregated. Despite the changes towards greater gender equality, food advertisers are still portraying gender in very "traditional" ways. Women are shown as a stay at home mom and men as an independent or working husband. Advertisers create gender stereotypes and use them to their advantage to sell as many products as possible. This paper is believed to give an insight into further research in the area.

**Keywords:** Food advertising, Food marketing, Gender stereotype, Developed countries, Consumers

### **1. Introduction**

Advertising plays a massive role in conveying messages, building expectations, and is advertising used as the most influential and compelling medium because of its audio-visual power and it acts as a socializing agent (Uray and Burnaz, 2003). Television conveys normative, social and cultural information to a broad (heterogeneous) audience. Through watching food advertisements on television, consumers build a perception how both men and women live and consume food. Food industries use gender marketing as a method to boost buyer's motivation and appeal. The sole purpose of gender marketing is to appeal specifically to men or women. Food producers and advertisers use this direct gender marketing approach in order to achieve increased sales (Missbach et al., 2015). Normally food is gender neutral, however, certain industries appear to distinguish food on the basis of gender. Food advertisements have been focusing on female stereotypes, particularly when it comes to physical

appearance and health. Food commercials present women as one very attached to nutritional food products rather than men and healthy foods are perceived “feminine” even though the product category as a whole does not carry obvious gender biases. Women are generally thought to be more concerned with the consequences of food consumption as well as the content of the food itself (Furnham and Li 2008).

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Gender portrayal in food commercials***

Although advertising has changed since the early twentieth century, food advertising has remained the same when it comes to the message sent to the audiences. Most advertising promotes food in gendered terms associating shopping and cooking with women. Now it is obvious that women have come far way from being the stay at home mom and just a caretaker for the home. But advertisers are still feeding into this type of woman, the mom who cooks for the family. This is why women are in the focus for advertisers (Madar, 2015). According to Katherine Parkin in the US, kitchen work and serving food are mostly portrayed as women’s work which is believed as a demonstration of love for their family. Advertising establishes and reinforces the belief that by buying and making the particular product, women could achieve a social status, a happy marriage and healthy children (Parkin, 2006).

A big difference between the way men and women are presented can be found in how working roles are portrayed. Women are shown to be in non-working roles and if they are in a work-role, they are most commonly presented as employees (An and Kim, 2006). Even though women’s participation in the labor market has shown a dramatic increase, women in commercials have always been attached to domestic setting and presented as a wife, mother or housekeeper. They have also been shown as dependent on others at home and depicted against a background of children giving an opinion based rather on a “scientific” argument for the product advertised (Furnham and Li, 2008). Whereas generally men are shown as quite occupied with work usually in public (Royo et al., 2007), and are described as professionals, expert’s authoritarian, independent, intelligent, hardworking, objective decision-makers as interviewers, narrators, or celebrities in other locations different from home (Furnham and Paltzer, 2010). Furthermore, ads continue to project women, which limits the viewers’ attitude towards women comparatively more incapable than men. Generally, men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, aggressive and largely uninvolved in human relationships. Whereas women are shown as sex objects that are usually young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent and often incompetent. Women characters on ads are presented as ones who devote their primary energies to improve their appearances and take care of homes, family, and friends, enmeshed in relationships or housework. Media relays the cultural image of women as ornamental objects whose primary functions are to look good, please men and serve their family. Certain food advertisements use women as a sex object to transmit sexual information displayed as nudity, sexual behavior, physical attraction, sexual referents and sexual embeds. Women are often seen as having an erotic experience with food in ads. Advertisers offer food as a way to relate sexual images to their product creating a connection between the consumer and the product. For example, Kim Kardashian, a celebrity in Hollywood known for her sex appeal played in Carl’s Jr commercial eating sensually a salad, acting in a sexual behavior, making eye contact with the viewer, which creates interpersonal interaction.

**Figure 1.: Advertising portrayal of women as a sex object**



As discussed by Furnham (Furnham, 2016), individuals should conform to the role expected by their gender's stereotype, these portrayals could, therefore, lead to behavior at odds with modern social norms, as consumers bid to avoid contradicting the stereotype described by the advert, for example, viewing advertisements portraying gender role stereotypes reducing women's self-confidence and their aspiration in leadership affecting their career ambition. Furthermore, the repeated observation of such negative stereotypes at a young age could lead to children learning archaic gender roles that are reinforced in adulthood by continued exposure to these advertisements. Moreover, Eisend (Eisend, 2010) mentioned in his study that previous research examined predominantly short-term attitude changes. Under the meta-analysis of 64 studies regarding gender portrayal in advertising, he found that advertising primarily depended on the widely accepted gender attitudes and values in a society with no significant lasting effects on the viewer's attitudes. His study has been the first to provide a definitive evidence to the debate regarding the influence of advertising on the perception of gender roles in society

## ***2.2. Food Advertising Stereotypes***

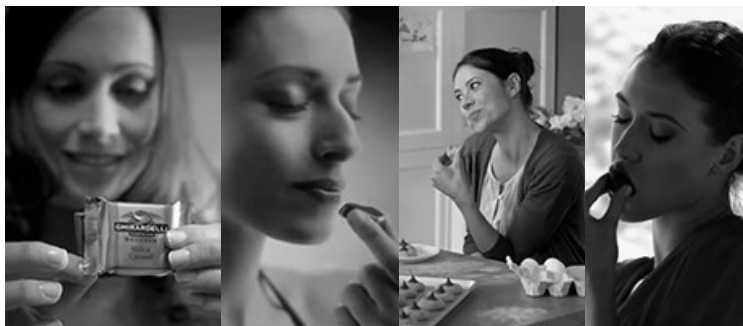
Gender biases have always been presented in food advertising for long decades. Certain foods are stereotyped as either masculine or feminine when marketed to the consumers. The ways that food corporations present men and women in commercials and other forms of advertising contribute to gender stereotypes. How men and women are showcased in advertisements causes these stereotypes to grow and become more like natural phenomena. Most of the food ads show, what we consume is heavily gendered. Marketers reflect a feature of masculinity and femininity to make food appealing to us: Yogurt and certain types of breakfast cereals are branded as healthy, light and slimming, which is mostly are advertised to appeal to women, while energy drinks and heavy foods are branded as powerful and strengthening advertised targeting men. The attitude that women eat healthy food and men eat less healthy food is common in the developed countries. These sociocultural influences end up affecting what we buy in grocery stores, and what we choose to eat more. Marketers seem to take advantage of this attitude. Foods they advertise are gender stereotyped for example, we just do not see women eating steak, burger, and pizza, in commercials the way we see them eat yoghurt. Marketing companies target a specific gender to sell certain food. For example, we do not see a man on ads looking excited to eat yoghurt. Do we? So, do advertisers imply that yoghurt is for women?

**Figure 2.: Advertising claims that “yoghurt is for women”**



Male and female are influenced by gender-stereotypical food advertising. Researchers indicated that both men and women were more likely to see unhealthy food options as masculine and healthy options as feminine and people were more likely to dislike foods that did not match these stereotypical gender characteristics. Furthermore, researchers show that women are more likely to go for nutritious and diet-conscious foods. Whereas, men are more into less healthy options (McNeilly, 2016). On the other hand, women appear to eat more responding to emotions and feelings (Elfhag and Linne 2005), for instance craving dessert when dealing with PMS and breakups. The perception that “women crave sweet more than men” is a paradox with the fact that they choose healthier foods. Despite being lovers of chocolate and sweets, women are more likely to be concerned about their weight. Moreover, women are also reported having more frequent negative feelings and regrets associated with sweet consumption (Lafay et al., 2000). They feel guilty of indulging them. Generally, sweets are most associated with women. It seems that women cover the highest portion of the chocolate industry’s target market. We see a lot of chocolate commercials aimed at women. Take a look at the following pictures.

**Figure 3.: Feminine characters in chocolate commercials**



It is true that there is a perception that chocolate is for women and it depicts a feminine character but companies also come with special chocolates designed for men which depict masculinity. A good example would be Snickers chocolate “masculine hunger bars” (Boost, Snickers), which cuts hunger and fills you up rather than give you a feminine treat. Companies do whatever it takes to make as much money as possible. These companies drag consumers into the gender stereotype zone and compel them to think that that particular product is for one particular gender.

Figure 4.: A masculine character in a chocolate commercial



Food producers and advertisers use this direct gender marketing approach in order to achieve increased sales (Missbach, et al., 2015). How food companies make their products sell is that they decide who they want to buy it and they advertise to them. If the product has a masculine character, the advertisement will be designed to persuade men to buy the product. Therefore, men will buy products that are seen as masculine in the public eye because they believe they are meant for them. For example, a commercial of Dr. Pepper is a highly gendered stereotypical ad. The commercial was targeted to men only directly saying it clearly that the product is not for women. The goal is to encourage men to buy it and discourage women from buying it (Jirvictor 2014). It seems pretty obvious that these kinds of strategies decrease the possible sales of the products by women because of the limited gender target, however food industries are still making a profit out of it.

Figure 5.: Gender stereotype in advertisements



### ***2.3. Culture-based stereotype***

Different countries have different cultures. Food is one part of cultures, which has a symbolic value of a particular society. Food and eating are highly associated with one's social life. Our interactions with others involve the consumption of food and drinks. We consume foods together with others or in the presence of others and that might influence how we consume certain types of food (Vartanian, et al., 2007). Gender stereotypes are not limited to what we do or what we wear but obviously and almost universally extend to how we consume food as well (Sarah 2015). Women are ashamed of eating food which is supposed to be for men and men are ashamed of eating food which is supposed to be for women (Eva 2010). For instance, biting big in public would be shameful for women, while it is normal for men. Not only the type of food we eat is associated with our gender, but even the amount we consume. If a woman eats of a plate, full of food then she will be considered as an overeater. Food marketers seem to understand the cultural pressure acting upon it. For instance, they came up with extra small burgers. It is not clear who invented them but it is no question that they were designed for women. Firstly, the burgers are very small so that they will not add much fat meeting the health-conscious need of women. Secondly, presumably women will not worry what the society around them would think of seeing them eating. They can just eat it without shame and satisfy their needs. You may wonder how very small the burgers below are. Yes, they are small because they are made for women.

**Figure 6.: The extra-small burgers designed for women**



We live in a very modern generation but we still live with an old culture that men must eat more than women because they are physically bigger and stronger. Such types of culture-based food biases still exist. Although it is a primitive way of thinking, it seems we have not changed the perception that it is very normal for a man to overeat and engulf everything as long as his physical appearance falls under the socially acceptable figure. However, it is considered gross for women if she is seen eating a lot. In fact, people will disgrace her and say “she eats like a man”. It is not a big deal for men to participate in eating contests, in fact, they will be glorified and praised for that but if women engage in similar eating contests, they will be considered as unfeminine, disgusting and unattractive. If women eat the way men sometimes do publicly, they do it in private and in shame. The stereotype that women eat light foods like salads and fruits perpetuates the destructive mentality that women need to take fewer calories because they should maintain their body weight in order to be thin, which is the symbol of being attractive and sexy. On the other hand, women are also more fragile, so eating heavy food would certainly cause them to gain weight (Amber 2014). For example, in a restaurant, if a man and woman are on a date, it is very common that to see the man ordering the steak and the woman ordering the salad. In America, it has been claimed that a woman would not dare

to order a stake in a restaurant, especially on her first date because she does not want the guy to get the wrong impression about her eating habit. Saving herself from being judged, she would eat salad although she craves for some meat.

**Figure 7.: The extra-large steaks designed for men**



During a research among undergraduates at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada it was discovered that if a woman was sitting with men, she was more likely to eat the food of a lower caloric value than if she was sitting with other women. Boys did not change their caloric intake whether one girl or a gaggle of girls joined the table. Particularly girls between the ages of seventeen and twenty believe that boys are more attracted to females who eat less. Under the same study, it was found out that girls consumed low calories because the salad leaves are meant to say “ I’m pretty; I’m attractive and I take care of myself”. Boys, on the other, seem to have no such need to alter their food intake to impress the opposite sex. The study showed that they eat pretty much the same regardless of who their dining companions are (Michael 2014).

Over time, salads have been branded as feminine and burgers as masculine (Adeline 2016). This categorization of food based on gender is created by the influence of culture and norms. Due to the cultural standards, people become judgmental about what others eat and the amount they consume. If we realize how we have been conditioned by the cultural norms, we would have learned that the foods are gender neutral. Everybody has its own unique relationship with food and the way food affects them, regardless of whether they are identified as men, women, trans or otherwise. It is true that women and men have biological differences, but most of the differences about the way how we should eat are socially constructed rather than based scientifically. When we learn more about the stereotypes of food habits in our daily lives and their effects on our food preferences, we will refrain ourselves from the judgments and become more open. This will allow us to accept the society regardless of which gender eats what food. Even when our choices seem to break the social rules, we would not care but eat like a human being (Claudia 2016).

#### ***2.4. Gendered food packaging***

According to Robine (Robine 2015), gender-specific packaging influences what we pick in the grocery store, and whether we believe the products are good for us. The wraps that products are covered with and their colors could be stereotypically feminine or masculine. Packaging with script-style fonts and subtle colors is used for healthier foods, whereas more masculine packaging with large fonts and bold colors is often used for less

healthy foods. In the study, the exact same blueberry muffins were packed in several different ways. One featured a football background, along with a high-energy or power message, using the word “mega”. The second package was more portraying feminine features like a ballerina and a message saying “healthy”. Package three was the hybrid of the feminine message with the masculine one. And a fourth package put together a feminine image and a masculine message. In the two cases where the packaging and message matched the stereotype-masculine packaging with a masculine message, or feminine packaging and messaging - subjects were more likely to pay more for the muffin and believed it tasted better. When the messaging was mixed up, pairing a masculine image with a feminine message, people said the muffin did not taste as good (Robine 2015).

What we can understand from the finding is that how people are highly affected by the way products are packed. The same product can be packed in a different stereotypical wrap and can cause a difference in preference between genders. Usually, consumers fall for these kinds of tricky and pointless packaging, which marketers purposefully do just to differentiate sex. I wonder how successful these kinds of packaging are. For example, take a look at these products.

**Figure 8.: Gendered food packaging**



The images above show how products can be gendered by their wraps only. For example both chips seen in the first image are the same. The only difference is the packaging and the message that the marketer wants to send to the consumers. As we can see from the picture, the products are packed with a feminine (lips) and a masculine (mustache) prints. And the suggested serving style is also stereotypical, as the feminine chips are supposed to be eaten with yoghurt and the masculine chips with BBQ sauce. The message that the marketer wants to send has the connotation “women like yoghurt and men like meat”.

### ***2.5. Food advertising to children and the gender bias***

According to Child and Maher (Child and Maher, 2003), there is a strong presence of gender preference in the advertisements for children. As her study shows the preference of gender in the food sample is significantly greater on several measures than the non-food advertisements for children. It is clearly seen that the food advertisements contain a greater distortion in gender distribution for voice-overs, dominant product users, and main character roles. Her findings raise some concern as it contributes to a general gender dominance favoring boys as dominant figures and role models. The dominance of male in the food industry’s advertising to children is more likely a reflection of the cultural bias



and outlook of the advertisers than a conscious decision. The subtlety of this message suggests that boys may be superior to girls and of greater concern, may suggest that girls are inappropriate consumers of food.

### **3. Methodology**

The framework of this paper is developed based on some secondary sources of data such as scientific articles and online sources. The scientific articles were gathered through Google scholar. The keywords used to search the articles were food advertisings, gender stereotype, consumer behavior, etc. All literature used in this paper are from studies in developed countries such as the USA, Australia, Canada, Spain, Scandinavia and Turkey. The review articles include studies from the period 2003-2017.

### **4. Conclusion**

Consumers' behavior is affected by food marketing. The way foods are packed and advertised plays a significant role. People seem to shape their lifestyle and choices of food based on the advertisements they are exposed to. The food marketing influences consumers to test and give preferences to foods in relation to gender. The TV commercials and advertisements have the impression of what women and men should eat and not eat. There are certain types of foods that are characterized as feminine or as masculine, where in most cases there are healthy and unhealthy foods respectively. Furthermore, the foods we consume are highly gendered due to the cultural stereotypes that implicitly shape food preferences. Nevertheless, this difference is not based on science rather manmade, created by advertisers. Men crave for steak and women want chocolate because of food advertising. There are no biological reasons for either food to be gender specific. Gendered advertisements in the food industry influence the thoughts of the consumers and embed stereotypes into their mind. When women are exposed to ads in which the women "diet", they are more likely to aspire to have this type of role in their own life. Despite the changes in greater gender equality and conceptions that "men" and "women" are to serve distinct roles in society, advertisers seem insistent on portraying gender in very "traditional" ways. Gender stereotypes can be so powerful that they bias people's thoughts. Therefore, we should be aware that food marketing can affect our behavior as a consumer and try not to be deceived by pointlessly gendered food advertisements.

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