**Course paper**

**ADVERTISING AS A MEDIUM OF GENDER-BIASED COMMUNICATION**

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## Introduction

Gender issues in communication have attracted attention of many researchers. There has been considerable interest in the possible contributions of the mass media to the origins and maintenance of gender roles (Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Culley & Bennett, 1976; Dominick & Rausch, 1972; Furnham, Abramsky & Gunter, 1997; Furnham & Skae, 1996; Kolbe & Langefeld, 1993; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978). Studies using educational books (Lobban, 1975), picture books (Weitzman, Eiffer, Hokada, & Ross, 1972), and comic strips (Potkay & Potkay, 1984) have shown that men and women are portrayed in stereotypic fashion, suggesting that the media are by and large consistent in their gender role stereotyping,[[1]](#footnote-1) which underlies the importance of the present research.

The purpose of this research is to reveal gender stereotyping in advertising. Grounding on the accessible sources survey, the paper offers an overview of the significant role that mass communication plays in contemporary gender issues. At a closer look, the communication perspective allows us to examine gender communication as a form of intercultural communication. It can be assumed then that, having gained a considerable part of the communication process, mass media are subject to gender stereotypes, which is examined on TV and radio advertising. Focusing on these two types of media is dictated by their primary impact channel — auditory, which makes TV and radio advertisements more difficult to be ignored by the audience than similar messages in the printed types of mass media. The analysis considers both social and linguistic issues, aiming at detecting some general features of how gender bias is manifested in advertisements.

The paper consists of the introduction, three chapters, conclusion, reference list (sources directly quoted) and the list of works consulted (sources used during the research but not referred to in the text of this paper).

**1. Cultural Preconditions of Gender Stereotypes in Communication**

**1.1 Intercultural perspective on gender and communication**

Cross-gender communication is seen by many scholars (such as Porter, Samovar,[[2]](#footnote-2) and Penington[[3]](#footnote-3)) as a form of intercultural communication. The constituents of intercultural communication are points at which significant differences may occur in communication patterns, habits, and traditions across cultures.

Communicative practices not only reflect notions about gender, but they also create cultural concepts of gender. Message sources privileged by society as legitimate knowledge generators create a web of socially compelling discourses. Thus, religious, mythic, philosophic, and scientific discourses teach us, among other things, about society's values and rules related to gender. It is no accident, then, that American stereotypes focus on the active male and the supporting female, or that Plato defined women as "lesser men," or that Aristotle described women as "a deformity, a misbegotten male," or that St. Thomas Aquinas argued that god should not have created women, or that craniologists of the nineteenth century argued that women's smaller heads justified their subordinate position in society (thus initiating all the "pretty little head" rhetoric about women), or that Freud believed women had "little sense of justice," and so on.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In addition, mass mediated messages offer the most contemporary, powerful, technologically and rhetorically sophisticated stereotypes for shaping cultural reality. The beauty, diet, and advertising industries are the most obvious, best researched examples of contemporary, self-conscious myth-makers who control cultural concepts (and acceptable images) of gender (of what it takes and means to be male or female, masculine or feminine).[[5]](#footnote-5) The opportunities for generating (and receiving) mass mediated messages is staggering. So too is the opportunity for abuse.

Communication is of central concern when addressing gender issues. Rhetorical messages in large part determine what we consider knowledge, what knowledge we privilege, and what values we espouse. Furthermore, the role of culture in communication practices directs us to an intercultural perspective on gender and communication.

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**1.2 Proxemics and gender**

"Space is a primary means by which a culture designates who is important, who has privilege."[[6]](#footnote-6) Differences in the amount of space given to and taken by women and men reflect societal gender roles. So, women are less likely than men to have their own private space within the family home. And, in the workplace, employees in the traditionally female role, secretary, generally have a smaller space than the employee in the traditionally male role, executive. Responses to invasion of space also differ between men and women. While men may respond aggressively, women tend to yield space rather than challenge the intruder. These are but a few examples of the ways in which differences in communication between the genders fit categories of primary elements in intercultural communication. The point is that these differences can create problems in communication. Julia Wood devotes a whole chapter of her book Gendered Lives to the ways in which these problems are manifest in the educational system. We might assume too that the same problems are likely to visit the university library as well. An abridged list of the concerns Woods discusses includes issues familiar to us all: lack of female role models, curricular content which misrepresents white men as standard and renders women invisible, biased communication in the classroom (in both student-faculty and student-counsellor communication women are not taken seriously).(Wood, pp. 206-229.)

As it follows from the above said, gender stereotypes occur in communication patterns, habits, and traditions across cultures, proving that gender communication is a form of intercultural communication.

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## 2. Manifestation of Gender Bias in Mass Communication

Proceeding from the above analysis, it is of interest to assess the extent to which the mass media have responded to cultural trends in the society. It can be assumed that, having gained a considerable part of the communication process, mass media are subject to gender stereotypes. There has been considerable recent interest in the possible contributions of the mass media to the origins and maintenance of gender roles[[7]](#footnote-7). Studies using educational books[[8]](#footnote-8), picture books[[9]](#footnote-9), and comic strips[[10]](#footnote-10) have shown that men and women are portrayed in stereotypic fashion suggesting that the media are by and large consistent in their gender role stereotyping.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In this context it is interesting to examine if and how stereotypes are reflected in TV and radio advertising. The choice of these two types of media for more detailed analysis can be explained by their nature. Namely, as long as their primary impact on the audience is made through the auditory channel, the advertisements included into TV and radio programs are more difficult to be skipped by the listeners and/or viewers than similar advertising in the printed types of mass media.

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### 2.1 Gender Stereotyping inTV Advertisements

advertising gender communication

Studies in this area show that TV advertisements aimed at men differ from those aimed at women. This is reflected not only in targeting a particular product at a particular audience. In doing so, we can observe, firstly, using specific day parts (daytime, evening primetime and weekend afternoon sports) as a framework for the supposed target audience (women, family and men respectively). Secondly, and this is a more serious issue, the advertisements aimed at one sex tend to portray gender differently from the advertisements aimed at the other sex.[[12]](#footnote-12)

There is now fairly widespread conceptual agreement and empirical support for the view that television can and does profoundly influence the viewers' intellectual development, change their attitudes, encourage attitudes and behaviours, and spread some stereotypes.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is as a socializing agent that television is particularly powerful. Because viewing television involves the observation of others' behaviour and its reinforcement contingencies, television is considered to be a major vehicle through which the viewers learn about behaviours, particularly gender-appropriate behaviours, and about the relative desirability of performing those behaviours.[[14]](#footnote-14)

McArthur and Resko[[15]](#footnote-15) found that overall men appeared more often than women in television advertisements and that men and women differed in terms of credibility (men being authorities and women users), role (women portrayed in terms of their relationship to others and men in a role independent of others), location (men shown in occupational settings and women in the home), persuasive arguments (men gave more `scientific' arguments than women), rewards (women were shown obtaining approval of family and males, while obtained men social and career advancement) and product type (men were authorities on products used primarily by women).

Despite improvements since the seventies in the status of female characters, the TV commercials of the early eighties still revealed stereotypical gender roles. Male characters for example, were still more likely to be portrayed as employed outside the home while women were typically found working in the home. Males were also given greater credibility than were females. Male and female adult characters were also still clearly associated with activities traditionally associated with their gender (i.e. men were associated with mowing the lawn, while women were associated with doing the dishes). Finally, they discovered that ninety percent of commercials had male narrators, and that this was true even in the case of commercials for stereotypically female products. Also, there was a clearly gendered association of loud music and dark settings with male characters. This is of importance, as the narrator is considered the voice of authority. By selecting predominantly male narrators, advertisers are identifying males as the most deserving of respect. They are working from the assumption that viewers are more likely to believe what they are told by a male voice. Finally, male characters were most often shown alone, participating in stereotypically male behaviour.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Manstead and McCulloch[[17]](#footnote-17) assessed the situation in Great Britain using 170 television commercials so legitimate comparisons could be made. The overall results were unambiguous and comparable to those of the American study, but the portrayal of men and women on television showed British advertisements at the time to be more gender role stereotyped.

More recent studies have been done, specifically on television advertisements, in Australia[[18]](#footnote-18), Kenya[[19]](#footnote-19), as well as America[[20]](#footnote-20), Canada[[21]](#footnote-21), Italy[[22]](#footnote-22) and Great Britain[[23]](#footnote-23). Replications over time have shown surprisingly few differences. The researchers regarded six features: the product advertised, gender of the voice-over announcer, gender of the on-camera product representative, setting, age, and occupation of the characters.

The results of studies indicate that men and women appearing in television commercials were portrayed in not independent ways. The nature of these associations were systematic and in line with traditional gender-role stereotypes. These findings reveal that television commercials manifest traditional gender role stereotypes.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The male figures' typical credibility basis as an authority of the advertised product complements previous findings.

Men were most likely to be portrayed as interviewers, narrators, or celebrities in occupational settings or in unspecified locations, while women were most likely dependent on others. However the difference between the two (males and females) was not as great as expected concerning the professional role.

Location is still a significant predictor of gender stereotyping. Females are more often portrayed at home while males are more frequently portrayed during leisure/outdoor.

Age is often one of the best indicators of sex-role stereotyping. Although studies define "young," "middle-age," and "old" on slightly different scales, a prevalent picture is indicated: females are consistently shown as younger than males. Most studies show that central figures are dominated by middle-aged males and young females. The depiction of female figures as young is a typical feature of advertisements from Australia and United States[[25]](#footnote-25). This implies that advertisers consider it important for women to be portrayed as youthful and consequently attractive, whereas this is not as important for men. Instead male figures are depicted as being older - most male figures are middle aged - which may enhance this commonly presented image as authoritative experts.

The content category "reward types" showed many gender role effects. There is a significant association between gender of product user and reward type. The general pattern is that males are shown to be associated with pleasurable rewards, while females are more portrayed as rewarded with social approval and/or self-enhancement.

Women were more likely to appear in adverts for body products and most likely to be associated with food products.

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### 2.2 Gender role stereotyping in radio advertisements

Less work appears to have been done on gender roles on radio.[[26]](#footnote-26)

A study by Furnham and Schofield[[27]](#footnote-27) compared the extent of gender role stereotyping in commercials on British radio with that of the content of commercials on television content. They found that in radio advertisements men were more often portrayed as authorities on products and women as users of products; men were more likely to be portrayed as narrators or celebrities than women; and women were more likely to be portrayed in the home than man. Furnham and Schofield concluded that, compared with advertisements on British television, British radio advertisements were gender role stereotyped on fewer dimensions. Hurtz & Durkin[[28]](#footnote-28) replicated the study using 100 Western Australian radio advertisements. They found that males were more often central characters; more often in authority roles. Females were most often portrayed in dependent roles and in their home, while they were portrayed as customers or girlfriends in the workplace.

The research was concentrated on the following parameters.

Credibility. Central figures were, categorized as "user" when they were depicted primarily as users of the advertised product, while those who were depicted primarily as sources of information concerning the product were categorized as "authority." Central figures depicted as neither use nor authorities were categorized as "other."

Role. Central figures were classified according to one of the following apparent roles: "dependent," meaning primarily financially dependent (spouse, home-maker, girlfriend), "narrator/celebrity," "professional," or "other" (including "worker").

Location. Central figures were categorized according to the location in which they were depicted, either: "home," "occupational setting," or "other."

Type of reward. Four categories of reward were coded: "self-enhancement" where the purported benefit of the product was an improvement in health or appearance, "practical" where the purported benefit was a saving of time or effort, or where the main emphasis was on the relative in expensiveness of the product, "social or career advancement" where it was suggested that ownership of the product would assist progress in some social or occupational hierarchy, "other" where the rewards could not be coded in any of the above (including `family approval' and `fun/enjoyment'").

Type of Product. Four categories were coded: "Body/Home/Food" where the product or service involved bodily health, hygiene, cleansing, the home or housework, food, and drink, "Auto/Technical/Occupational" which included automobiles and accessories, and technical and occupational products; and "other" if none of the above categories was applicable.

Narrator. Central figures were categorized according to whether they portrayed a character, ("character") or narrator/presenter ("neutral").[[29]](#footnote-29)

The analysis of the research data showed that, in all, only three data were significant: role, reward, and product. On two specific criteria, men and women were portrayed in significantly different ways on British radio advertisements. Overall men were more often portrayed suggesting practical and social career advancement as a reward for product purchase, and women as suggesting self-enhancement as a reward for the product. Men were more likely to be portrayed in advertisements for automobile, technical and occupational products and women more likely to appear in advertisements for body, home and food products. In addition, women were more likely than men to be shown in dependent roles. Males were also significantly more likely to have a role of narrator/celebrity than females were.

It is concluded that the amount of gender role stereotyping in advertisements varies depending on the target audience. There are inevitably many other social, economic and political factors that influence gender role development, portrayal and understanding. Further, audiences are selective in terms of when they listen to which station/channel, and why.

## 3. Language Issues in Advertising

Recognition of the potential influence of mass media on gender-role development has spurred a continuing interest in monitoring the degree of gender-role stereotyping in commercials. Beginning in the early 1970s, researchers assessed the degree of stereotyping by analyzing the content of gender-role messages.[[30]](#footnote-30) The choice to focus on content is most likely attributable to the long-established tradition of content analysis. For decades it has been used as an objective, systematic, and quantitative method for analyzing the manifest features of communication. It is based on the assumption that information about the nature of people's psychological states and social roles can be obtained by analysing their choice of language and other observable, visible characteristics.

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### 3.1 Gender and language usage

From a very early age, males and females are taught different linguistic practices. Communicative behaviours that are acceptable for boys, for example, may be considered completely inappropriate for girls. Hence, the body of research on women and language reveals that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language usage treats them.[[31]](#footnote-31) So, for example, women reflect their role in the social order by adopting linguistic practices such as using tag questions, qualifiers, and fillers to soften their messages. Likewise, traditionally women were identified by their association with men, and we know that occupational titles indicated which jobs were "for men" and which were "for women." While much of this has changed today, the society retains a tendency to imply that maleness, after all, is the standard for normalcy (a female physician may still be referred to as a "woman doctor," and while a female committee chair may be called the "chair" or the "chairperson," a male in that role will more likely be called "chairman").[[32]](#footnote-32) What we are taught about gender, then, is reflected in our language usage.

Johnson and Young[[33]](#footnote-33) suggest that the way language in advertising is used to link a particular product to a particular gender polarizes differences between genders. While in reality many boys demonstrate feelings and behaviours labelled as "feminine," and vice-versa, these television ads create the impression that certain behaviours are exclusive to one or the other gender. Young children exposed to this type of advertising have not yet developed the thinking skills that would allow them to view these ads critically. Johnson and Young are concerned that such ads present stereotypes that may hinder boys and girls from recognizing themselves as the complex and multifaceted individuals that they are.

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### 3.2 Differences in language usage and worldview

Many scholars describe the female worldview as significantly different from the male worldview. Carol Gilligan states that "female identity revolves around interconnectedness and relationship." Conversely, she argues that male identity "stresses separation and independence."[[34]](#footnote-34)

Obviously, differences in language usage and worldview are woven together and difficult to separate. Hence differences between female and male worldviews, like differences between Asian and American worldviews or European and Native American worldviews, may significantly affect communication. Differences in worldviews cannot be discussed without talking about language, since our view of the world is expressed through language and other symbol systems. Deborah Tannen argues that "communication between men and women can be like cross cultural communication, prey to a clash of conversational styles."[[35]](#footnote-35) This is due to differences in the way men and women generally look at the world. Therefore, it is no coincidence that women see talk as the essence of a relationship while men use talk to exert control, preserve independence, and enhance status.[[36]](#footnote-36) The ways in which concepts of social relationships (and their accompanying communication patterns) differ between genders are parallel to gender differences in worldview.

The difference in the spoken accent was also polarized between genders. The accent used by central figures in advertising was coded into two categories "standard" (for the research on radio advertisements it was when an English BBC type accent was spoken), or "other" if it was any other accent (including "Londoner" and "regional").[[37]](#footnote-37)

Language also reflects differences in social status between genders. Research on gender and language reveals that female language strategies invariably emulate the subordinate, nonaggressive role of women in Western society. And, language about women does no better.

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### 3.3 Voiceover characteristics

The observations show that in advertising males are likely to appear as voice-overs and females to be depicted visually. The higher proportion of males comprising the voice-over category suggests that it is men much more than women who are considered to have knowledge about products. Thus, the male bastion of authoritative voice continues unscathed.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Contemporary research by Fern Johnson[[39]](#footnote-39) shows that even ads for children feature male voice-overs. Ads for girls usually, but not always, used female voice-overs. Usually an adult voice was used for the male voice-overs, but about one-sixth of the girl-oriented ads used a girl's voice for the voice-over. Voices, whether male or female, were caricatured in the majority of ads, with male voices often sounding unnaturally deep, husky or loud, and female voices unusually high-pitched, squeaky, or sing-song.

Although women have a reputation for being more verbal than men, boys were more likely to be speaking in ads showing both boys and girls.

Levingstone and Green's[[40]](#footnote-40) also report that silence is presented as a particular feminine quality.

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### 3.4 Word choice

Verbs provide clues to the type of action being expressed, the agent of the action, and the activity being undertaken. Johnson and Young[[41]](#footnote-41) classified the verbs used in the ads into five categories:

· Action verbs relating to physical movement or motion.

· Verbs indicating competition or destruction.

· Agency/control verbs indicating that the child consumer can exercise power or control.

· Verbs indicating limited activity or a state of being.

· Feeling and nurturing verbs Feeling/nurturing verbs were used solely in girl-oriented ads, while competition/destruction verbs were used almost exclusively in ads directed towards boys.

· Action verbs were more evenly distributed between ads for boys and girls, but agency/control verbs were more likely to be used for boys and limited activity verbs in ads for girls. The word "power" was used in 21% of the ads oriented towards boys, but only mentioned once in ads for girls.

It can be assumed that advertising for children reflects the general tendencies of mass mediated commercials for the adult audience, and a special research may prove that language issues will work similarly in the whole bulk of the examined material.

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### 3.5 Use of Arguments

Central figures were categorized according to the type of arguments they presented in favour of the advertised product. Arguments were classified as "scientific" if they contained or purported to contain factual evidence concerning the product or as "non-scientific" if they simply consisted of opinions or testimonials, and as "none" if the central figure offered no argument.[[42]](#footnote-42) The examination shows that in using persuasive arguments men gave more `scientific' arguments than women.[[43]](#footnote-43)

A review and comparison of fourteen studies done on five continents of sex-role stereotyping in television commercials over 25 years[[44]](#footnote-44) show that "end comment" is still highly indicative of sex-stereotyping. Males more frequently offer an end comment in an advertisement, whereas females frequently do not give any end comment.

As we can conclude, language is a vivid reflection of gender stereotypes in mass mediated advertisements, manifesting the bias on the lexical, phonetic, semantic and pragmatic levels.

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## Conclusion

The given study makes it possible to conclude the following.

1. It is proved that gender stereotypes in communication are culturally preconditioned. That is, cross-gender communication can be considered as cross-culture communication, including issues of behaviour traditions and proxemics. The tendency to evaluate another's culture as inferior to our own is perhaps the most difficult stumbling block to avoid, especially when applying it to gender communication. So, instead of becoming annoyed by a male's aggressive communication style, we should recognize that it is a style which is as much a part of his identity as an ethnic cuisine or a religious tradition is part of a culture.

2. It is shown that mass communication, and specifically TV and radio advertising, is a reflection of gender stereotyping in society. Mass mediated messages offer the most contemporary, powerful, technologically and rhetorically sophisticated stereotypes for shaping cultural reality. Moreover, mass media do not only actively exploit biased models, but they also negatively influence the audience by implanting the gender stereotypes into the viewers and listeners' conscience.

3. Analysis of language usage in advertising proves that it also reflects culturally preconditioned gender bias manifested on the lexical, phonetic, semantic and pragmatic levels.

By learning not to assume that men and women are the same, we can become more sensitive to the fact that men and women's values and goals may differ, and generally their verbal and nonverbal language will vary as well. Conversely, awareness of societal preconceptions and stereotypes which portray the other sex as "different," or "opposite," can help us to avoid such stereotypes. As long as the task in improving intercultural communication is awareness and respect rather than evaluation, this awareness can help to develop effective communication when speaking across genders. Ultimately, guidelines from this study may be useful in improving gender communication in mass media and, more specifically, in advertising.

##

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