

# ADVERTISING COMMUNICATION AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

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## **Abstract:**

*Our article maintains that advertising communication, as a form of commercial communication, is an important part of public communication. Ads are not just forms of promoting products or services, but also modern forms of speech that contribute significantly to the formation of the individual's identity in contemporary societies. The study aims to identify and analyze the presence of gender stereotypes in Romanian media advertising.*

**Key words:** advertising; commercial communication; gender; stereotypes; identity.

**JEL classification:** M37

## **Introduction**

In an economic environment where communication becomes an integrant element of business and where consumption supports the persuasive message, advertisement is the most efficient tool that offers a company or an entity the possibility to promote itself or to promote its offers and services.

In order to communicate efficiently, any company, product or service must have an identity, to be easily recognizable, generating the desired reactions: sympathy, information, action, purchasing, etc. An identity is most easily expressed by a logo, slogan, trade mark and mark image. The more these succeed to better individualize the company, the products or the services advertised, the more efficient the communication of the advert is. In order to facilitate the communicated message, the advertising operators often use stereotypes in the communication process, because the ad manages to easily standardize representations, preconceptions or values, which characterize a society.

Beyond the wide diversity they take, stereotype definitions follow the idea of mental scheme, of a simplified structure, easily applicable and recognizable in actual situations. The stereotype helps an individual build a certain way to perceive things and understand reality, a way of knowing the world, or an anchorage in a certain context. According to Andrew M. Colmann, a stereotype is „a relatively fixed and oversimplified generalization about a group or class of people, usually focusing on the negative, unfavorable characteristics, although some authorities recognize the possibility of positive stereotypes just as well.”<sup>1</sup>

Advertisement, understood as a pattern of commercial communication, mainly promotes stereotypes, in the process of building the message intended to be communicated to the consumer.

„In the advertisement discourse – Mădălina Moraru notes – the stereotype is a generalized representation of an idea through which the service or the product is described, so that it suggests a universe or a social category. Through advertising,

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman, M.A., *Oxford – Dictionay of Psychology*, Oxford University Press Inc, New York, 2003, p. 706-708

operators try to catch the core of the consumer's world, so that purchasing a product belonging to a certain brand will become a necessity and it will express the idea of loyalty."<sup>2</sup>

Gender stereotypes are among the most frequently used in commercial communication. Most often built in binary opposites – male qualities vs. female qualities – gender stereotypes are „one-sided and exaggerated images of men and women, repeatedly used in everyday life. They can usually be found in mass media, operating as widely accepted simplifications."<sup>3</sup>

The choice and the decision to buy – two essential elements of the marketing process are tightly linked to the consumer's typology and his receptivity to the commercial communication. A public's field of expectations is created by stereotyping, because people are used to pick up messages in a standardized manner. The stereotype gives a sensation of familiarity and psychological comfort, so the consumer purchases products according to the expectations he/she has.

### **Objectives and Methodology**

The objectives of our research were the identification and analysis of certain gender stereotypes broadcasted through Romanian mass media advertising.

The research methodology used in order to reach the proposed objectives was based on analyzing specialty literature, rounded by a content analysis on the broadcasted adverts in two of the monthly magazines with significant number of copies, published in Romania.

Reviewing the specialty literature focused on studies and analysis made in Romania, with the purpose of identifying the presence and characteristics of gender stereotypes that appear throughout mass media broadcasted advertisements.

For the content analysis, the investigated units were represented by the following magazines: *Cosmopolitan* no. 3 (145/2012) and *Men's Health*, 2012, March edition.

*Cosmopolitan* is an American magazine with monthly releases having as its target young women, and it is the best sold magazine for this sector. The magazine held by the press trust Hearst Corporation has 58 de international releases and it is published in 32 languages and distributed in more than 100 countries. The magazine was published in Romania in September 1999, being edited by the Sanoma-Hearst Group Romania. In 2011, it had an average circulation of over 40.000 de copies.

*Men's Health* is a men's magazine from the United States, published in over 40 countries. It is the magazine with the highest number of sold copies among those dedicated to men throughout the whole world. *Men's Health* has also been on the Romanian market since March 2005, edited by Burda Romania. In 2011, it had an average circulation of 20.000 copies. In December 2009, the publication license for the magazine was taken over by Attica Media Corporation.

### **Research Results**

In *Cosmopolitan* magazine, no. 3 (145/2012), out of a total of 172 pages, 46 are assigned to explicit advertisements, representing 26.74% of the display space. The percentage destined to advertisement is reduced to half – 12.93% – in the magazine for the male target group. Thus, only 15 pages out of the total of 116 of the *Men's Health* magazine, in March, 2012, are covered by adverts.

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<sup>2</sup> Moraru, M., *Mit și publicitate*, Editura Nemira, București, 2009, p. 134

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, G. (editor), *Dicționar de sociologie*, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2003, p. 587

The range of promoted products and services is shown in the following tables:

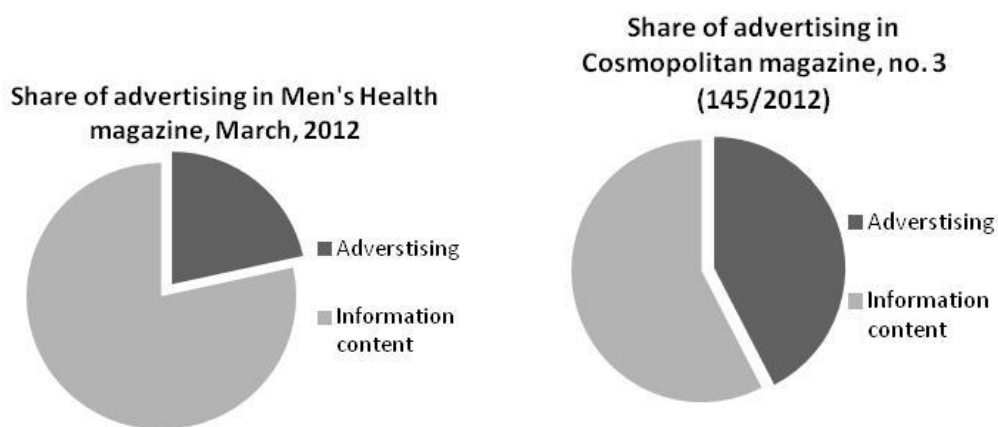
Promoted products or services	Frequency
Cosmetics	28
Clothing and Footwear	7
Gastronomy	3
Personal hygiene products	1
Professional training	1
Personal care and beautician services (gyms, beauty salons)	5
Medical services	1
Cars	1
Malls and online stores	3

Table 1. Promoted products and services in explicit advertisements in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, no. 3 (145/2012)

Promoted products or services	Frequency
Cosmetics	4
Clothing and Footwear	1
Medication	1
Cars	1
Sites with useful information	2
Magazines	6

Table 2. Promoted products and services in explicit advertisements in *Men's Health* magazine, March, 2012

In addition to the pages directly dedicated to advertisements, we can discover on the pages of the analyzed magazines a significant area used for presenting certain products that are identified by brand and price. Thus, in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, in columns with titles like *Style secrets* (16 pages), *Promo-Cosmopolitan* (1 page) or *Style Insider* (7 pages) products of clothing, footwear and accessories are promoted and they are identified by brand and price. In addition, different articles with a relatively low informational content, present cosmetics or clothing products, indicating their brand and price. By adding exhibition space to these columns and articles, that implicitly promote products and services, to the space allocated to explicit advertisement, we notice that almost half – 42.43% – of the magazine's content is dedicated to advertisements, one way or another. We find a similar situation in *Men's Health* magazine: columns as *Refresh your style* or *Insider* present clothing products, cosmetics or services, naming their brand and price. Explicit and implicit advertising covers 21.55% of the studied magazine's content.



Regarding explicit advertising on the pages of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, most images are of young and beautiful female appearances. There is only a very low number of advertisements (3) with male characters, whereas the ads where we can only see the promoted product are only 13. The studied ads promote the stereotype of the ravishing woman: very beautiful, young, tempting, barely and provocatively dressed. The three attributes of a woman that define the target readers of the magazine are: ravishing, strong, feminine. Adverts are focused on the imagistic content; the text is almost missing, so the persuasive undertaking is rather iconic. The appeal to celebrities is also present. The image of well-known actresses or singers is associated with the promoted cosmetic products. The use of the authoritative argument, that places a celebrity as a user in the ad, induces the aspiration of a woman to get closer to the ideal image, by mediating the product.

The gender stereotype promoted in *Cosmopolitan* magazine is clearly identifiable: the young, ravishing, strong woman. There is a movement trying to come against the tendency of standardizing feminine beauty – that of some companies promoting their services and products having as model images women with common features, who are not necessarily young. Adverts as those promoted by the brand *Dove*, propose gender anti-stereotypes, which have as a purpose esthetical de-canonization. These anti-stereotypes try to induce the idea that beauty does not have a universal standard.

In the pages dedicated to advertisements in *Men's Health* magazine, we find a gender stereotype that is very well outlined. One of the emblematic images is that of the professional surfer, model and well-known photographer, associated with a promoted brand of perfume. We can also see the idea of seduction in advertisements for technical products. (phones, cameras, computers, etc.) In these situations, the product is seductive and the closeness of the woman as a user is ideal. There is a transfer of qualities. By touching the product, the woman somehow gives it her qualities, thus establishing a connection between the user and the product.

## Conclusions

The results of the research underline the fact that the analyzed advertising space is impregnated with gender stereotypes, adapted to target readers. The presence of gender stereotypes in magazines, especially in the ones with a very well defined target audience, could be explained by the intention of marketers to facilitate the reception of commercial communication. Adverts frequently promote gender stereotypes and most often contribute to a selective diversity of the standardized gender typology.

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