

# Gender stereotypes as a reflection of women



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The media holds up a mirror to our society. As condemned as the media may be, it does reflect much truth and reality. This is especially so for comics and advertising media because they are very much inspired by our daily lives and struggles (Klein, 1993). Commercials and comics should never be solely regarded as the promotion of tangible objects as they carry subtle messages and reinforces certain ideas subconsciously.

Gender roles are underlying and recurring themes in these commercials and it is crucial to understand the development of the images media portray because they have a strong correlation with the society. As these forms of media dominate the industry, we have to be wary of how it validates and ascertains our gender perceptions, which governs the way we behave and expect others to behave. Commercials have been found to be influenced by society, as Huang discovers that in more patriarchal societies, gender role stereotypes are more common (Kaufman, 1999).

This implies that commercials are in fact, a reflection of the society.

Similarly, women in the commercials during the inaugural WNBA season are shown to be more masculine as the society becomes more accepting of women who participate in considerably more aggressive sports, like basketball (Wearden & Creedon, 2002). As the society develops and gender roles change, advertisements also evolve to adapt to the climate and changes. To compensate for the rise in women's power, men find the need to change " their bodies to be even bigger and stronger than women's" (Cortese, 2008, p. 72).

With gender role reversal taking place in advertisements and comics (Cortese, 2008; Klein, 1993), gendered images seem to be moving out of the stereotype images. A change in the traditional images of women portrayed in commercials has also been discovered in the area of physical activity, which “ suggest that it’s acceptable for women to be powerful and aggressive” (Wearden & Creedon, 2002, p. 207). On the other hand, feminist comics which challenge the stereotypical definitions of femininity by integrating masculinity, offer the likelihood to redefine gender roles (Klein, 1993).

Despite the increasing number of non-stereotype images in commercials, studies have demonstrated aspects of these commercials which undermine the effectiveness of the non-traditional gender image portrayed. Alternative effects of these images include the promotion of the formation of a new stereotype for females, in which masculine traits can only be exposed in sports but feminism must be displayed and maintained everywhere else (Wearden & Creedon, 2002). On the other hand, the portrayal of non-traditional roles to advertise traditional products also has an effect of subverting its message (Kaufman, 1999).

Moreover, Lopate reported that traditional images of women were still prevalent in magazines despite some changes in the way they portray women (Tuchman, 1979) and traditional function ranking remains to be a big draw for marketers (Cortese, 2008). Even women who work in the media industry frequently create stereotype images of women because they believe that these are what women are interested in (Tuchman, 1979). It

would then be reasonable to say that these stereotype images and its underlying message are here to stay, at least for the time being.

Yet, if these images are negative, oppressing and considered as symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1979; Klein, 2003), why is it that they are still rampant and popular in the media? There is then a need to explore the reasons for which the stereotype images in the media continue to exist. If the advertising media and comics are reflecting reality and these traditional images of women have yet to diminish, it has to be that there is some measure of truth in these stereotypes and women possess aspects the media portrays in reality.

Therefore, it can be established that female gender stereotypes still persist in advertising media and comics because they reflect women according to their emotional, social and domestic needs. Emotional needs Advertisements often depict women reclining or lying on objects, which convey dependence and appeasement (Cortese, 2008). Similarly, “ love and romance comics reinforced the desirability of women making choices and sacrifices for love. ” (Klein, 1993, p. 62)

Duncombe and Marsden reported that in their own study, women told the interviewer they wanted their partner to signal attachment, by unprompted intimate or romantic gestures and actions, because this would make them feel emotionally special (Delamont, 2001). In addition, Williams found that emotional sustenance in marriage is especially important for women (Thompson & Walker, 1989). A woman’s emotional need for companionship

and love can then be seen to be largely fulfilled by a man, as conveyed in a woman's image of insufficiency (Cortese, 2008).

A regular issue with marriage is when a woman feels that she has not achieved the level of emotional intimacy with her husband, which she needs, deserves or wants and thus, her unhappiness results in the contemplation of a divorce (Delamont, 2001). Women's desire for the affection of men consistently prompts them to attract men's attention. However, men are less expressive with words and often show their emotional intimacy through sexual activity (Delamont, 2001; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

This is repeatedly reflected in the advertising media and comics and demonstrated by how women construct themselves to be objects for the male gaze (Klein, 1993) so as to receive men's expression of love in the form of sexual intercourse. It was also observed that changes in a woman's physical attractiveness due to age have shown to lessen husbands' faithfulness, happiness and sexual interest (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Therefore, in order to retain their husbands' affections, they will have to sustain a youthful image.

This is reflected by their endorsement in health and beauty products in commercials out of concern for their physical appearance (Wearden & Creedon, 2002). In addition, women would even perform domestic duties for relatives (such as adult sons) as a hedge against loneliness – as an insurance policy (Delamont, 2001). By carrying out such domestic services, the company of their family and relatives is guaranteed. This is correlated to how women are constantly portrayed in commercials as caretakers of the family

and always ensuring that their families are satisfied with their domestic services (Kaufman, 1999; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Social needs Women in the advertising media and comics have also constantly been depicted as social creatures, where they attempt to create an identity and improve their social status by their obsession with their physical appearances. Le Monchek discovered that the emphasis on one's appearance in comics reveals that the real source of self-esteem for many women still lay in the way they looked (Klein, 1993).

This is due to the notion that a woman's physical appearance is an indication of her social status (Delamont, 2001). Commercials for health and beauty products continue to show conventionally, beautiful young models (Wearden & Creedon, 2002). Advertisements have been consistent in their portrayal of women's association with vanity and beauty because society has exerted a pressure for women to look attractive and beautiful. Comics have also explored the social expectations placed upon women to be glamorous and society's tendency to judge respectability by costume (Klein, 1993).

In fact, it has come to a point where physically appealing women are generally more advantaged, creating the need for them to maintain youthful looks and attain physical beauty. It has been noted that " discrimination against fat women is common, in employment in particular" (Delamont, 2001, p. 64). There is a need to keep up with society's demands and expectations so that women are able to fit in and gain acceptance in society. " For many women in Britain, body size is the biggest stigma: fear of being seen, or seeing oneself, as fat is an ever present terror. (Delamont, 2001, p. 64) Since few women turn to sports to achieve an ideal figure in fear of an '

unfeminine' muscled physique (Delamont, 2001), they resort to health and beauty products and companies. With such particular concern over one's physical features, it is no wonder women are constantly represented as touching themselves, a sign that one's body is delicate and precious (Cortese, 2008). As part of achieving a social identity, middle-class white women believe they are not seen as fully adult until they are mothers (Delamont, 2001).

According to Bailey's study, women reported that their social status was upgraded as a result of their pregnancy because of the big responsibility that came with a child (Delamont, 2001). This goes to show that women view motherhood as critical in attaining an adult identity. The more frequent portrayal of women with children in commercials as compared to that of men, as observed by Kaufman (1999), is reflective of the reality of a woman's craving for motherhood. Domestic needs Women have always been the main character of advertisements and comics associated with children and household products.

Women in their 30s to 50s were mainly depicted as middle-aged housewives or career women still primarily responsible for domestic work (Wearden & Creedon, 2002). As found in Kaufman's study (1999), women with children, but without spouse, appear in commercials for children's products twice as many times as that of men. " Women feel that shopping, cooking, cleaning, child care, elder care and even family happiness are their responsibility," and if they are not shouldering majority of this burden, guilt creeps in (Delamont, 2001, p. 106).

An additional reason for the willingness of women to undertake the lion's share of family work is because then, their husbands will think well of them (Thompson & Walker, 1989). This emotional and physical labour women take upon themselves reflect their sense of domestic responsibility as part of their essential nature and desire. Beyond household duties, "mothers have a responsibility for their children that is exclusive and constant." (Kaufman, 1999, p. 441) With such a responsibility comes the need to ensure their well-being by showering them more time and care, along with the best child-care products.

This is also supported by Thompson and Walker (1989), who claimed that a child's dependence on his mother is important to her sense of personal worth. It has been noted that this is also the case in reality. Baxter and Western have observed that wives spend twice as much time on domestic work as compared to their husbands and "only 13 to 14 percent of the women found the division of labour unsatisfactory" (Delamont, 2001, p. 105). On top of that, Demo and Acock also found that "even when wives work outside the home, they perform more housework than husbands" (Kaufman, 1999, p. 440).

They remain as the primary caretakers regardless of their employment (Thompson & Walker, 1989). This proves that women do indeed feel a greater sense of responsibility towards their homes and children, which commercials have accurately reflected in associating women with household and children. Counter-arguments Since traditional images of women in commercials seem to be receiving unequal treatment in the society, one might argue that the stereotype images in commercials are not reflective of

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women today because many of them are discontent with their inequality in comparison to men.

However, one also has to bear in mind that seeking for such equality comes from feminist perceptions and do not substitute the inherent characteristics and desires of a woman (Delamont, 2001). For example, a woman might prefer her husband to make more significant contributions to household chores, but this does not undermine the responsibility she has towards domestic duties. There might be other reasons, such as her desire for him to do so as an expression of care and love for her (Thompson & Walker, 1989).

In fact, Kranichfield claimed that the bonds between mothers and their children are ignored and invisible sources of women's family power (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Polatrack has also argued that the home is women's dominion and being the only domain in which they have power, many are reluctant to relinquish or share control of it, which also results in their ability to direct their husbands in household chores (Thompson & Walker, 1989).

This shows that the stereotype images are, after all, relevant in today's age where they still possess traditional characteristics, while seeking to attain some form of equality. Considering that these traditional images not only exist in commercials, but are also very prevalent (Klein, 1993), the women of today must be able to relate to them very well. This has to be so since the advertising industry thrives on its appeal to the masses, which means they do reflect women's needs to a large extent.

Conclusion As media ought to reflect reality, there has to be some truth in the traditional images that continue to exist despite newer depictions with notions of gender equality. Women find emotional, social and domestic relevance in the stereotype images portrayed in comics and advertising media, which has made room for the sustenance of such images. Since the media is a reflection of the society, such portrayal of women will only cease to exist on the day women no longer find any relation to them.

#### Reference

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