

Gender Stereotypes in Digital Advertising Case study: L'Oréal

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Половите стереотипи в дигиталната реклама Казус от практиката:

L'Oréal

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Авторите нямат известен конфликт на интереси, който да разкриват.

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Abstract

This paper briefly presents the image of gender stereotypes in media and also in advertising and respectively, digital advertising. The purpose is to observe if nowadays famous beauty brands (in this case - L'Oréal) still use gender stereotypes in the materials published online, on different social media platforms (in this case – Instagram). Throughout the research questions, the authors discover if there are any gender stereotypes present in the selected corpus, which are the strategies used to spread these stereotypes, and which are the roles played by women and men in the posts. In terms of methodology, two will be used two approaches, adapted to the purpose of this study: first, the coding scheme provided by Goffman (1979) and Butkowski et al. (2019), for photos, and secondly, for videos, the coding scheme elaborated by Dominick & Rauch (1972) and revised by Aramendia-Muneta et al. (2019).

Keywords: digital advertising, gender stereotypes, beauty brands

Резюме

Тази статия представя накратко образа на джендър стереотипите в медиите, а също и в рекламата и съответно дигиталната реклама. Целта е да се проследи дали в днешно време известните марки за красота (в случая - L'Oréal) все още използват полови стереотипи в публикуваните материали онлайн в различни социални медийни платформи (в случая - Instagram). По време на изследователските въпроси авторите откриват дали в избрания корпус присъстват полови стереотипи, какви са стратегиите, използвани за разпространение на тези стереотипи и какви са ролите, които играят жените и мъжете. От гледна точка на методологията, се използват два подхода, адаптирани към целта на това изследване: първо схемата за кодиране, предоставена от Goffman (1979) и Butkowski et al.(2019) за снимки и второ, за видеоклипове - схемата за кодиране, разработена от Dominick & Rauch (1972) и преработена от Aramendia-Muneta et al. (2019).

Ключови думи: дигитална реклама, полови стереотипи, марки за красота

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Brief description

Nowadays digital advertising is becoming more and more relevant in what concerns both the companies, the suppliers, the people deeply concerned by the modifications that occur in the marketing and digital space, and the general public, who is tempted not only to buy but to compare and analyze the product or the brand from many points of view. As can be seen and demonstrated, „television, newspapers, magazines, and radio are no longer the only media to encourage and influence consumers to purchase a specific product or service” (Aramendia-Muneta, Olarte-Pascual & Hatzithomas, 2019). The power of the internet is crucial in this area.

It can be stated that the purpose of digital advertising is represented not only by the fact that it „enhances competitiveness, (...) promotes the acquisition of goods and services” (Jimenez, Dittmar & Vargas Portillo, 2020), but it „is a clear instrument of asymmetric information, (...) which depends on the consumer's confidence” (2020). Following this idea, throughout the digital branch – a significant advantage in contemporary society -, it can be remarked that brands are closer to the public, it is easier to transmit information and therefore, to create a certain image, which can be rapidly transformed into a set of norms and beliefs regarding the company. It was mentioned above that confidence is an important issue in what concerns brands: it is built over many years, campaigns, products, and messages and any small mistake can cause a big damage to the entire structure. The public does not only demand a good product but also shares the same beliefs and values as the brand. In this sense, people also analyze the company's perception concerning gender stereotypes, gender identity, or violence towards women or men.

Advertising vs. digital advertising

When analyzing advertising and all the messages published online or offline, the most important idea is „the role of mass media as *cultivators* of audience perceptions of social reality” (Tan, 1979, p. 283). It is commonly known that the information published will affect people's behavior, but in this matter, it should be emphasized that the process of choosing which campaigns, messages, and parts of information shall be delivered and promoted to the public is far more relevant. The public will be attracted towards specific subjects, values, and norms, will gain information about concrete products, and will tend to trust more specific brands, that have a good budget to promote their views. In this way, the media expresses its biggest power.

Before starting an advertising production or campaign, one must understand the advantages and disadvantages of using specific media vehicles (Balaban, 2021, p. 130). Every

day it can be observed that there occur new opportunities in different contexts, the dynamics can be changed and so the type of media instrument should be chosen following these ideas. Even though nowadays the majority of brands choose to use the digital sphere to launch or to promote a product, companies are still using the traditional ways, like TV, radio, or written press to talk about their services.

For many years, TV campaigns were very relevant for any kind of company that wanted to show its new developments or the latest updates. In what concerns the gender aspects, Pennock-Speck (2016, p. 364) shows that TV „projects rather conservative views of society, especially in terms of gender portrayal”. This strategy tends to be used by the media people, particularly for those who still spend a lot of time in front of the TV and who are on the old generation. Nowadays researchers study how TV advertising influences people's behavior while watching a movie, a series, or a show and suddenly a new spot appears during the pause. There are some advantages for companies to use television as a tool to promote new items: firstly the large audience, the fact that the message can be repeated in a small unit of time, and the creative opportunities (Balaban, 2021, p. 137).

In what concerns print advertising, nowadays, people do not manifest a consistent interest in this perspective, because of the emergence of the Internet. Nevertheless, journals and magazines still present information about services and products which tend to influence the perception regarding brands. Throughout the years it was exposed that on the one hand, female-audience magazines tend to expose women who are preoccupied with their bodies, offering different types of advice to become skinnier, more beautiful, and appreciated by men, and on the other hand, male-audience magazines will expose women as sexual objects, as the subject of all their desires (Shinoda et al., 2020, p. 6). Mentioning these aspects, it can be emphasized the fact that even by choosing a specific type of magazine, one can have a different image of the social reality. In conclusion, one of the most important advantages of using magazines for advertising purposes is the fact that they are conceived for a specific target audience (Balaban, 2021, p. 133), who can understand and agree with the ideas presented. There are also disadvantages in promoting products in magazines. The public does not memorize quickly and effortlessly all the information and it is more interested in flipping rapidly through the pages. Even though a magazine has an extended lifespan, the rapid evolution of new items and products can represent a challenge for media representatives, who must adapt and introduce new products, to satisfy the public's demands.

Digital advertising represents an interaction from 'many to many' using social media and other sites or platforms that facilitate the promotion of services online. Both the public and the companies adapted rapidly to these aspects. For brands, online advertising is very relevant in terms of time, budget, and capability to express and impress people everywhere. Although there are so many positive edges that must be taken into consideration, the digital side is rather difficult to control, and „the entire industry must assume more responsibility for consumer and user protection” (Jimenez, Dittmar & Vargas Portillo, 2020). In this new context, all the actors important in the process began to change their views, and their campaigns, to satisfy the needs of the consumer (Aramendia-Muneta, Olarte-Pascual & Hatzithomas, 2019).

Gender stereotypes in media

Stereotypes are present in the images created by the media that concern race, religion, gender, etc. To understand their power, one must realize that they „activate cognitive schemas or oversimplifications that are already present in the minds of members of a group whereby certain characteristics are attributed to the group itself or another group” (Pennock-Speck, 2016, p. 365).

The analysis conducted by Goffman (1979) showed that gender stereotypes in media are present and influence the relationship between the genders. The two concepts presented in his studies – hyperritualization and commercial realism - were bringing new powers to the entire academic space, by providing a connection between media and the creation of stereotypes. All around the world, researchers still insist on the mass media promotion of specific attitudes concerning beauty ideals for women and dominant behaviors for men in every type of instrument used: print, television, or digital (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Abdullah et al., 2019; Shinoda, Veludo-de-Oliveira & Pereira, 2020; Caldeira, Van Bauwel & De Ridder, 2022).

There are significant differences between how researchers started to analyze gender stereotypes at the beginning. At first, the biggest issue was the picture created by the media for women. From the 1960s many studies were conducted to emphasize the stereotypical image of women, continuously sustained by the press or television in articles or advertisements, to change the attitudes towards women. The dichotomy presented during the 1980s - subordinated woman vs. tough man - „reproduces simplified and distorted views of interpersonal gender relations” (Butkowski et al., 2019, p. 819). The significant development of society can be perceived, but nowadays there are still media channels that present „depictions of females as housewives, dependent upon men, or merely concerned with their physical attractiveness persist in contemporary advertisements” (Tsiehla & Zotos, 2016, p. 983). On the other side, the new

media offers another perspective on this issue: while people can express themselves through photos, videos, or messages, they also can use inevitably gender stereotypes in their posts, showing how „individuals recycle stereotypical codes of femininity and masculinity in their self-representations at an unprecedented scale” (Butkowski, 2020, p. 16).

In what concerns the stereotypes affecting men, researchers started to analyze how they changed over the years, as a result of the large amounts of studies presenting their negative impact on individuals. In the beginning, the media depicted men „as authoritarian and older, portrayed outside of the home in independent roles” (Grau & Zotos, 2016, p. 763), emphasizing the idea of „hegemonic masculinity”, described in the works of Connell (1987, 1995). Even though the concept of hegemonic masculinity might or might not appear in the commercials and the traditional values are not always introduced in the spots, through its activity, mass media created a new type of masculinity, which led to a new trend – „the feminization of manly activities” (Del Saz-Rubio, 2019, p. 194).

In some studies, statements emphasize the fact that „both advertisers and researchers have become more aware of the specific effects of gender stereotyping in advertising, as reflected in prior studies, albeit with multiple media” (Aramendia-Muneta, Olarte-Pascual, & Hatzithomas, 2019, p. 3). Nevertheless, gender stereotypes are still explored by those who create trends, by people who work in fashion or beauty, or by those who create advertisements.

Digital advertising and gender stereotypes in beauty campaigns

Currently, researchers show that a large number of teenagers scroll all over the Internet, having accounts on many social platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, My Space, etc. (Herrero-Diz & Ramos-Serrano, 2018). Many of them are known as content creators, storytellers, and voices of their generation, but others are only actors in the process, following, listening, and reacting to those who create new patterns. Either of those two roles is not easy, because every day the reality of gender stereotypes is influencing their lives.

Boys and girls, men and women are following accounts, news, and influencers, but a largely followed field is represented by the beauty products pages, beauty campaigns, new launchings on the market, and celebrities talking about a product that made the difference for them and helped in their daily routine. This is a prevailing part of the social media environment, which contains stereotypes related to body, face, confidence, and beauty, in general. „The industry is dominated by four companies, namely L’Oreal, Procter, and Gamble (P&G), Beiersdorf AG, and Avon” (Abdullah et al., 2019, p. 597), but concomitantly there are nationally important brands, new options that tend to be exploited by the public in searching new

alternatives, to constantly use on Instagram the famous hashtags: #beyourself, #iwokeuplikethis, #confidentinmyskin. Via hashtags, one can build and present his/ her identity (Baker & Walsh, 2018) for the community and also, his/ her ideals, the main aspects of his/ her life, and his/her creed.

Many of those brands – newly discovered or Titans of the market – produced all over the years and still produce myths, and stereotypes, to ensure their survival in the field and to influence the mentality of the consumers, who must understand their necessities, their negative sides and to ask for their help throughout their products. In their never-ending path for perfect skin, body, and personal appearance, consumers tend to accept the ideas produced by social media in „presenting and recycling particular body-relevant themes” (Coupland, 2009, p. 38). One of the main subjects is represented by aging, a cultural preoccupation (idem, 2009), and how this problem can be remedied another important subject is the acne problems, which can cause psychological problems for girls and boys. Brands introduce specific products, new lotions, creams, or oils, in order not to combat the fear of insecurity or aging, but to boost these two axis.

Using social media tools, this process becomes a snowball technique: the brand publishes a campaign with a new, unbeatable product, the consumer sees the advertisement, reacts, sends the commercial to a friend, a colleague, or a group, searches for reviews about it, finds influencers paid to promote the product and finally buys it, convinced that it will be a life-changer. Lately, the industry directed those campaigns not only to girls or women, but men „have increased their consumption of grooming products or toiletries and this has brought a new relationship for male consumers with these commodities” (Del Saz-Rubio, 2018, p. 193). As women, men began interested in their appearance, health, and well-being, having an important role to play in what concerns the beauty industry. The market has an enormous amount of consumers, who are ready to purchase newly emerged products, mostly based on the quality and the content of the commercial.

Methods and materials

According to Brandirectory (2024), L'Oréal represents the most valuable and strongest cosmetics brands in 2023. Created in 1909, the company is still appreciated by make-up artists, celebrities, and people from all around the world for its products. Firstly directed towards women, since the 2000s, it has been directed also towards men, being in a constant evolution, proposing new items and innovating solutions for all the needs. Being a significant brand on

the market, it was considered appropriate to be selected for this analysis, to observe the content of its campaigns.

For this study, it was selected a corpus of 51 posts out of which 31 were photographs and 19 were short videos and were published on L'Oréal's Instagram page during the 1st and 10th of March 2024. The period was specifically chosen in order to better observe what are the communication strategies used by the brand during the most important period of the year for women – the 8th of March. The research questions are focused on: (1) are there any gender stereotypes used by the brand in its posts?, (2) what are the strategies used to spread these stereotypes?, (3) what are the roles played by women and men in the selected corpus? The unit of analysis is each post shared by the company on Instagram during the above-mentioned period.

In every digital advertising, the most important part is represented by the image: what the consumer sees and directly perceives. Thus, this paper will focus on the images and videos updated on Instagram, to discover how the gender image is recreated to generate profit. Two methods used before by other researchers will be the engine of this analysis. First of all, through the innovative approach proposed by Goffman (1979), named frame analysis - largely used by the scientific community all around the world (Doring & Poschl, 2006; Tschla, 2016; Butkowski et al., 2019) – it will be emphasized how it is created the image of women and men by the brand. It will be used the coding scheme provided by Goffman (1979) and Butkowski et al. (2019), for photos (Table 1).

Table 1

Coding Scheme for photos – Categories and sub-categories

Categories and sub-categories	Definition
<i>Feminine touch</i> Self-touch	Participant touches some part of their own body using one or both hands.
Caressing object	Hands outline or caress an object rather than grasping it.
<i>Ritualization of subordination</i> Canting	Bending of the head or body to make it appear lower in frame.
Imbalance	Participant stability. Applies only to standing posture.
Posture: sitting/ lying down	The participant is discernably not standing upright.
<i>Licensed withdrawal</i> Withdrawing gaze	Eye gaze averted from the camera.
Loss of control	Demonstrating expressive emotions.
Faceless portrayal	Eyes or full faces are somehow obscured from view.
<i>Body display</i> Body display	The degree to which clothing reveals body parts.

Note: See Goffman (1979) as cited in Butkowski et al. (2019)

Furthermore, for videos, it will be used also a coding scheme (Table 2) provided by Dominick & Rauch (1972) and revised by Aramendia-Muneta et al. (2019), to observe how the brand promotes its products for men and women. Every sub-category will be marked with two numbers: 1 – which signifies that it is represented in the post and 0 – which signifies the absence of the sub-category in the photo or the video.

Table 2

Coding Scheme for videos – Categories and sub-categories

Category	Sub-categories
Mode of presentation	voice-over, visual speaking, visual speaking & voice-over, visual non-speaking.
Role (central figure)	interviewer/narrator, professional, celebrity, other.
Age	Young (under 35) Middle-aged (36-50) Older (over 50)
Background	Mostly women Mostly men Mixed Mostly children None
Setting	private residence/home, occupational, leisure, fictional, animated, other
Credibility	Product user Social media prestige Other Neither

Note: See Dominick & Rauch (1972) as revised in Aramendia-Muneta et al. (2019)

Results

In what concerns the video analysis, it was discovered that 8 videos contained voice-over, using women's voices, 5 were presented in a visual-speaking mode and the rest of them were visually non-speaking. No videos were created for male products and with male actors. In terms of age, 14 videos contained young characters, 1 a middle-aged woman and 1 an older one. 3 videos did not include any kind of human being. Regarding the role of the main figure who appeared in the advertisement, 16 videos contained celebrities, known and appreciated

worldwide (actresses, influencers, models, etc.). The majority of the videos were presented in an occupational setting, created by the brand to promote the product. In what concerns the background, 4 videos showed other women, and the rest of them only the main figure, who was speaking or testing the item. When speaking about credibility, 12 videos provided images of the woman as a product user, but in this case, the character acted also as a person who has social media prestige. Therefore in a total of 16 videos, it could be remarked the woman identified as a person having social media prestige. In this sense, it must be emphasized that there were presented actresses or influencers, who are famous, not persons who have a voice in the make-up and skincare field.

On the other side, when analyzing the photos, at first, it must be underlined that 15 of them contained only images of the products, without including other actors. An important fact is that 3 images, published on the 8th of March, were dedicated to sexual harassment towards women, a L'Oréal campaign that took place all over the world. A large majority of images contained licensed withdrawal, the character using a withdrawing gaze, not looking at the camera, and in some situations, adopting a languorous glimpse. 3 posts contained a feminine touch, precisely self-touch. In some cases, the person was touching her head for a more fashionable look. In 7 posts the loss of control was identified, as the character was lightly smiling, laughing, or being surprised. There were also pictures where faceless portrayals appeared: the face could not be seen by the public at all, the eyes were covered with sunglasses, and the main accent was on the woman's mouth. In 4 photos it can be seen body display: the woman shows her legs, the abdomen, the neckline, and the shoulders.

Conclusions

The current study explored the gender stereotypes in digital advertising and showed, through methods and instruments, some of the issues covered under the commercial perspective proposed by the brand. It could be seen that the brand uses connections with celebrities, most importantly young celebrities, to promote its products. The photos and videos used were created to provide a perfect image, not only in terms of setting, characters, and story but also through filters and editing. Even though the company releases videos with different cultures and nationalities, there can be found a similarity: all the actors involved are known, and have a significant voice online. The public does not get the opinion of any unknown people who tested the products or who wanted to speak about them. The male side is not very powerful, there are few products, only 2 videos and 2 photos, where the public can meet the L'Oréal men. It is not about the inequality between the two genders, but in this case, the cosmetic part dedicated to

men is not as developed as that for women. Additionally, the posts were published during an important period for women and therefore, the focus must be on them. The whole picture created by the brand reinforces „the reflection of the society” (Grau & Zotos, 2016) few changes in this perspective, and few adjustments in that direction can lead to a new dynamic, but to feel, enjoy and embrace the change, there must be observed and analyzed the small, but significant details, which can lead to a disaster, if they are not controlled.

There are still images where the company uses feminine touch and withdrawing gaze, trying to convince that it is fashion that pushes it to post such images, not the reactions of the public. It can be stated that the relationship between individuals and the brand represents a complex aspect during this era.

Concluding this exploratory study, it was discovered that „stereotypical feminine gender displays that populate mass media are not eliminated in online contexts” (Butkowski et al., 2019, p. 832). Even though there can be observed few improvements and changes in what concerns the image of women, presented by brands on social media, there is still room for refinement and it is merely the beginning. Similar to the conclusions provided in the study of Baker and Walsh (2018), it can be stated that „despite the common assumption that social media allows for more fluid presentations of gender”, the brand still encourages some „hegemonic conceptions of gender” (idem, 2018, p. 4567).

This analysis could be expanded to a bigger period, to (1) compare also the changes that occurred throughout time on Instagram, (2) compare the Instagram posts shared by a large beauty company with selfies posted by teenagers or women, and (3) to observe posts published on Facebook or other social media platforms, to remark the differences that can appear in the messages taking into consideration the contexts and the public.

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