GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ROMANIAN COMMERCIALS: WOMEN'S ROLES

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Abstract: *Considering the theory of social roles, gender differences are followed by contrasting social roles, occupied by men and women. Thus, while men are portrayed as being more rational, pragmatic, "breadwinners", women are seen as emotional beings, developing their identity by the means of roles that involve the idea of giving something. Throughout this research, we aim at outlining the women and men's roles in some of the Romanian TV commercials, considering different stereotypes. Thus, this article represents only a piece of a complex research, being based on the analysis of certain TV commercials. In order to reach to justified conclusions, we intend to emphasize different traits that are shaped by the advertisements' protagonists. These traits are fundamental in pointing out the masculine-feminine relation, which is certainly influenced, for real or in appearance, by some internalized conceptions and ways of living. Taking into consideration the material being analyzed, we can discuss about the following women's roles: the attractive woman, seen as a sexual object, the housewife, and, rarely, the determined woman, being able to take control over a certain situation.*

Keywords*: gender stereotypes, social roles, women's roles.*

Forming stereotypes is considered "the shortcut" that people's way of thinking prefers, the kind of knowledge economy that entails advantages for the show advertising.

Historically, the term *stereotype* appears in 1798, referring to the printers' domain. In printing, it is connected to the metal printing plate created for the actual printing of pages (as opposed to printing pages directly with movable type) and used the process extensively, revolutionizing the book trade by his cheap editions. These stereotypes were based on rigidity, fixity and pattern[1] (Moraru, M., 2009: 118).

The term is considered to be the "creation "of the French typographer Firmin Didot.

As far as the socio-psychological sense is concerned, the term is used by Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* (1922). Lippmann considers stereotypes as "images of our minds", which facilitate the process of relating to reality.[2] (Lippmann, W., 1960, Public Opinion, The Macmillan Company, New York, p. 84 apud Moraru, M., *op. cit.*: 119).

In 1954, Gordon W. Allport realizes a comparative study related to Lippmann's ideas, considering stereotypes as "primary images, in which a certain category is invoked to justify an attitude". Therefore, these mental drafts are not only the result of mental perception, but also the effect of reason, which helps in the process of ranking and hierarchy of objects. (Moraru, M., *op. cit*: 121)

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[1] "Etymology supports this idea of inflexibility and conservatism by the meaning of the two words, taken from the Greek: *stereos*-solid and *typos*-sign."

[2] Lippmann associates this concept with images borrowed from arts, establishing certain analogies: "the stereotype forms borrowed to the world come not only from arts-in the sense of painting, sculpture and literature-but also by the means of our moral codes and social philosophy, as well as from our political agitation."

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The path shaped by Allport was continued by the ’70’s psychologists’ generation, who emphasized the significance of categorization. Tajfel and Wilkes, one of the leading cognitive psychologists, believe that emphasizing traits determines the group membership, the dissociation being outlined by the contrast phenomenon. Thus, categorization is the process by which the similarities and differences between social groups are stressed.(Moraru, M., *ibidem*: 114).

Advertising is the field that reflects many social representations, by influencing and promoting certain images that are easily standardized through commercials. The connection between advertising and stereotyping concerns several aspects: the given product and its presentation, the relevant consumer and the advertising show, that usually ”wraps” the product.

In the Dictionary of Sociology (edited by Oxford University), gender stereotypes are defined as ”one-sided and exaggerated images of men and women, used repeatedly in everyday life. They are usually found in the media, where they operate widely accepted simplifications” (Bălţătescu, Iacob *et alii*, 2003: 587).

Most of the time, in the mass-media field, stereotypes are constructed by binary oppositions: masculine qualities compared to the feminine ones. Men are more centered on the desire to stand out, to assert themselves socially, while women relate better with others, are the family exponents and their choice is-almost always-connected to the others.

At this point of the discussion, the social role theory becomes fundamental, as it supposes that every individual acts according to its role, largely determined by gender. The connected values are easy to identify for each and every role: ”for men-power, safety, individualism; for women-softness, beauty, sacrifice” (Moraru, M., *ibidem*: 135). Patriarchal societies always put women in men’s shadow, considering them as objects of pleasure, having less power of decision. Therefore, women are presented most often in the household environment, surrounded by children. Men are portrayed at work, active and important. Regarding the context of the presentation, the ”balance tips the scales” all in men’s favor: women seem helpless, vulnerable in their world, while men are the authority, almost always being behind an imposing desk.

Discussions covering the mentioned issues are current since the ’60s, but not even in the present, this binary ”picture” doesn’t seem to have changed significantly. In the collective mind, changing these images takes time. Nowadays commercials, even if do not shape this clearly, hide misogynistic tendencies. Thus, the Romanian successful commercials depict women either as ignorant drivers, or angry wives, in front of whom husbands are forced to lie in order to keep the freedom and occupations they had as bachelors. And these are only few of the evident stereotypes. In this situation, men are ”pushed” to express themselves outside the domestic universe, as it would be a restrictive one (Moraru, M., *op. cit.*: 136). This perception of the family-as a constraining place-outlines femininity and masculinity in opposition. This is the result of a patriarchal society, in which the woman is often a source of irony or pleasure.

To allow us to form an idea of how these theoretical issues are outlined in Romanian advertising, we are going to analyze some ads that caught our attention because of the way they shape the woman’s image.

Măgura-All sugar and honey!

The first Romanian commercial that we bring into discussion is the one made for the cake named *Măgura*. If the first advertisement is from 2007, the following

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appeared in 2010. The TV spot can be viewed as a continuation of that of 2007, as the context is the same: a girl subtly looks at the boy she has a crush for. It may seem, at first glance, that this advertising shapes the image of a gentle girl, who just wants a look form the boy she likes. Paying attention to the others scenes means realizing the opposite. The girl wants, besides that innocent look, a first date (which shall take place near a lake, in a romantic setting, where the couple shall be accompanied by a mariachi group), a perfect wedding, as those in fairytales (*Ileana Cosânzeana's* Romanian myth, being kidnapped by Prince Charming on a white horse, is emphasized here), an outstanding honeymoon (outlining the image of an exotic and very…expensive destination), a boy who shall have his father eyes and, without appearing as an exacting girl, a little house (in Romanian, the girl's latter desire is outlined by the means of a redundance/pleonasm, which is intentionally introduced, in order to hide a subtle ironic tone, as on the screen there is the image of a huge house, more exactly, the image of a mansion).

The advertisement keeps the same slogan (*Măgura- the cookie of all cookies)*, but introduces the leitmotif *all sugar and honey*. The two terms suggest, as connected to food, a pleasant taste. We should not neglect the archetypal value of the two ingredients, considered sacred and representing gods' food in the universal mythology.

The expression can also suggest that ideal of remote lands, appearing in Romanian fairytales. *Being all sugar and honey* may express the idea of opulence. Synthetically, the expression clearly outlines the girl's desires, even if, at a first level, this could be interpreted in the proper sense, that the mixed ingredients make *Măgura* the *cookie of all cookies*.

Alka-What if you wouldn't cook today?

Other advertisements that have caught our attention are the spots created for the *Alka* cake. The first of them, with the slogan *What if you wouldn't cook today?*, portrays a beautiful woman in the kitchen, announcing her husband by phone that she would prepare something sweet for the dessert. Being at work, the husband appears as terrified when hearing this. This idea is reinforced by his subsequent reactions: he rapidly throws the phone from his hand, jumps over his desk chair, pushes, on his way out, one of his coworkers, knocking the stack sheets she had in her arms and last, but not least, he remembers to take the fire extinguisher. The feeling of fear at the news that his wife will prepare something sweet does not fade at all, because, once at home and once in the building, he takes, on his way to his apartment, a bucket of water, from the maid of the flat building. Entering the apartment, his wife looks at him puzzled, asking what happened. While seeing the Alka cake, the man appears somehow ashamed of the thoughts which crossed his mind. Although funny, the advertisement has clear misogynistic overtones. The woman is shaped in a role that have become frequent lately, especially in men's opinion, that is the image of a woman that lacks any skills of a real housewife, as seen in the past.

Taking into consideration the evolution of society, it becomes obvious that the woman is able to handle her kitchen "duties" working much less than she did before. However, this should not entail a pejorative men's perspective. We believe that women should be valued, as they manage to divide their time according to a certain order of priorities.

The lyrics of the song chosen for the soundtrack of the ad, *Baby Love*-The Supremes, are very suggestive, shaping the story in which a man hurts, by his behavior, his lover's feelings.

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Alka-It puts some soul in it!

We continue our analysis with another Alka advertisement, the one with the well-known slogan: *Alka- It puts some soul in it!* This time, the feminine character appears in the role of a well-arranged woman, placed, again, in the kitchen, while trying to prepare a cake. Very concerned with the preparation of the dessert, she forgets about the food in the oven, which is compromised. Unfortunately, the cake also appears to be a total disaster, so all that the woman can do is looking with great disappointment of her ruined dishes. The husband turns out to be the ”savior” of the situation, as he comes home with flowers for his wife and with a big *Alka* cake. In the last sequence of the commercial, while the wife is happily looking at her perfect manicure, the husband comes with some slices of Alka cake on a plate.

Not accidentally, the spot has as soundtrack Tom Jones' song, *She's a Lady*, a song that advises men to treat their ladies with respect, valuing them for what they mean, and not necessarily for their cooking ”skills”.

In this commercial we can see, once again, the attempt to stress the woman's current status. Although she appears in the same ”setting”, the kitchen, she is concerned with her image (she is arranged, well-dressed), which is far away from the image of the normal housewife, as it is outlined in the collective mind.

Moreover, unlike the previous ad, the husband is the one that comes with the solution, by buying the cake. But does he do this because he is aware of his wife's ”skills” or just because he wants to show his respect and love for her? Which is the dose of misogyny in this spot?

Alka-Because things have evolved!

Continuing with the series of *Alka* commercials, we decided to analyze the two spots with the slogan: *Because things have evolved!* The idea that women are not to be seen as ”slaves” in the kitchen is highlighted by a presentation of the beauty industry evolution. Thus, if in 1954, the first electric curlers appeared quite large and inappropriate to be used with pleasure by women, now, arranging the hair is a pleasure, as the protagonist ad sits relaxed in the chair at the hairdresser, being arranged by a stylist. For relaxation to be complete, the happy girl tastes with pleasure from a slice of Alka cake.

The same ”trend” is reflected in the second spot, having the same slogan: *Because things have evolved!* Progress appears to be outlined through three images of women-housewives: that of the maid who has to endure her mistress' pretentions, that of the flirtatious wife, whom the husband serves a glass of champagne, and that of a wife and mother (surrounded by two children) for whom the cooking does not seem a dreadful duty, but rather a pleasure. Reaching our days, the woman is pictured in a very modern and clean kitchen (a sign that she did not need to ”use” it), while opening an Alka cake, slicing it and placing it on the plate, ready to be served.

If we would ignore some of the sexist nuances of the commercials made for *Alka,* we could say that the advertisements are trying to emphasize the active role of women, especially outside the kitchen. They have evolved, being able nowadays to highlight the qualities and capabilities outside the housekeeping.

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Avon

Another commercial that has caught our attention is the spot for Avon cosmetics, whose image is represented by the Romanian singer Antonia. This time, the advertisement uses a female voice-over and in the end, Antonia's voice comes to confirm the quality of the promoted products.

Despite some of the positive aspects reflected in this commercial, there is that risk called "the beauty myth", an ideal of female beauty promoted by media, which, however, has no real correspondent. The term was created by Naomi Wolf (1997) to describe the pressures of the patriarchal ideology, which are permanently disseminated by mass-media and advertising. That obsession with physical perfection, impossible to reach, generates insecurity, depression, physiological disorders with terrible effects for the individual, but beneficial for what consumer society means. (Dragomir, O., 2002: 261) Although apparently, this "beauty myth" may be the effect of a certain development of women's image, behind this mask lies a new Procrustian bed. It's like endless domestic drudgery is being replaced by silhouette, diet or, in this case, makeup drudgery. These advertisements may create "the effect of real" (French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu), which supposes that people, in this case, women, totally believe what they see, without putting beyond a critical process the displayed information or image. There is, therefore, through these advertisements, the risk of creating a stereotype: that women must submit a pattern in order to be appreciated and loved. Dominated by the aspiration to identify with certain patterns, women become victims of symbolic manipulation through the beauty myth.

From the beginning, the *Bergenbier* brand, with its well- known slogan, *Friends know why!*, seemed to promote a set of rules, like a secret code to which women's access was clearly denied. Among the following commercials, there is only one that promotes the image of an intelligent woman, who knows how to get what she wants from a man, without taking exclusively advantage of her physical appearance. In contrast, all the other advertisements make masculinity (with all that it concerns) that unique "brand" of *Bergenbier*. We believe that this exclusive masculine "trend" has rapidly turned into misogyny.

Bergenbier -The Order

In a bar, there are three ladies and three men having a date. The three men prove out to be real gentlemen, as they let the ladies to order first. Having a good time, the girls ask the waiter the name of the cocktail they had previously had. With a seductive voice, he tells them the name of the cocktail, Tsunami Passion, and then, without that charming tone, he informs the girls about the ingredients it contains: vodka, juice plum and mineral water. When one of the girls orders such a drink, one of her friends insists that the cocktail be decorated with the same little umbrellas as previously. The next scene of the commercial follows the men's "corner", who subtly imitate the girls' behavior, adopting a patronizing and ironic look. Deciding they will have *Bergenbier*, the men make a discreet sign to the waiter, which means (using the translation that appears on the screen) "without umbrellas". A reference, of course, connected to the ... girls' "innocence", that stirs the gentlemen's laugh.

This advertisement portrays the image of women as having a questionable intellect and being very easy to fool.

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Bergenbier-You're not anymore the man I feel in love with!

The second spot starts with the image of a smiling biker gang, that take advantage of their hobby: high speed, then relaxing while having a beer. Within the bikers' group, one stands out, becoming the "main character" of the commercial: a biker with long hair waving in the wind, who, once arrived in front of the bar, is served with a beer by an attractive lady. The subsequent story is quite known: the beautiful lady "monopolizes" entirely the biker. Thus, the man is admonished for the bad conduct which he had taken from his friends; he decides (of course, following his girlfriends' advice) to give up his long hair, although he does not seem at all pleased. Moreover, while visiting a car showroom, even if he stops-nostalgic-in front of a motorcycle, at his girlfriend's "friendly"...urge, he rapidly leaves that place and follows her. Finally, after all the changes he had gone through, willing or not, one morning, the man is greeted by his girlfriend by saying: *You're not anymore the man that I fell in love with!* These last scenes of the commercial are accompanied by the following suggestive words:. *yet another reason*…

We are being outlined that it is actually another reason why the man deserves to celebrate Men's Day, being honored for the stoicism with which he endured his lover's "tortures". Finally, he "treats" his queries with a beer, among his biker gang.

Thus, once again, we are being confirmed the fact that men and women's representation in advertising is far from being modified. We face this aspect mainly because the social role according to a cultural mindset hardly changes. The previous commercial shows a woman in the girlfriend / wife's role, whom is impossible to please. In front of her, the boyfriend/husband is almost unable to keep his freedom or to continue with his bachelor affairs. His bachelor behavior must radically change.

Bergenbier-The Unfiltered

It is, maybe, the only commercial of this brand which outlines a different image of the woman, by letting her step away from her classical "setting", the household. By the way she acts in this advertisement, the main character of the spot emphasizes a new feminine typology, namely that of a self-confident woman, aware of her qualities, both physical and intellectual. The commercial keeps, indeed, a little part of a stereotype: the woman remains the "object" of the man's gaze, but, even so, she no longer plays the role of the girl who expects to be proposed by some handsome man. She is determined and she dares to make the proposal herself. We may even say that there is a kind of anti-stereotype, an obvious "exchanging roles, that leads to the impression that the man is a victim"(Moraru, M., *op. cit.*: 136) , fact that does not match for each and every mentality. The young lady adopts a direct approach, initiating a discussion with an unknown man, in a bar. Before leaving, she gives him her phone number and shares a piece of advice that will help him not seem "desperate".

The man seems surprised by this situation, in which "the hunter" becomes "the hunt".

The awkward of this situation is thus associated with the new unfiltered Bergenbier. New roles, new taste!

Nowadays, we see that the ads go beyond that transactional framework, becoming a reflection of our culture and mentality. The economic level of advertising hides, obviously, that, "need behind the need", but on the cultural level, advertising is

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seen as a component of popular culture. Advertising reflects the values of a society, which it takes into account within the process of creating commercials.

In trying to highlight some conclusions from the analysis performed on a number of commercials, we can say that "gender explains the dynamics of men and women interactions, but at the same time, this dynamic seems to be a society structured one" (Băluţă, O., 2006: 31).

The advertising specialists do nothing but to use "codes and conventions developed over time, based on certain ideologies" (Petre, Iliescu, 2004:199), which are then spread by the means of socially accepted practices.

The commercial made to promote *Măgura* cake shape the following stereotypes: women are demanding, very hard to please and hard to understand. In an "all sugar and honey" relationship, man should make special efforts, managing to live up to his girlfriend's expectations.

The advertisement for the Alka cake is trying to some extent, to portray the image of the woman outside the classical kitchen "setting", but even if things have evolved, the fact that she is not able to show any "cooking skills", appears as inappropriate for a woman.

Beer commercials seem to reflect more clearly the dynamics of male-female relation in Romanian culture. In a previous analysis, we dealt, within beer commercials, with outlining the stereotype that women are not such good drivers. In the previous Bergenbier commercials, we may see the reflection of the following stereotypes: women are easily fooled, having a questionable intellect, women are authoritarian, infringing the freedom spouse and always trying to change him.

We believe that a new socio-historical context would suppose a reorganization of the traditional models, no matter the domain. This shift would mean a more flexible, open-minded perspective.

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