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THE FEMALE STEREOTYPE IN THE MEDIA

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Abstract

We all recognize female stereotypes promoted in the media: la femme fatale, the sexy bomb, the supermom or the career woman. Regardless of where they stand, television, magazines, commercials abound with idealized images of women that represent physical perfection.

In this complex network of influences and interferences, the media, whether they are a mirror of society (giving the public what they expect, want or demand), or a symbolic construction thereof, play a fundamental role in our preferences for a particular normative model of gender, influencing our opinions, decisions, criteria for evaluation and reporting to certain social situations or categories.

Keywords: femininity, stereotype, media

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1 THE PICTURE OF BEAUTY IN THE MEDIA

Pictures of women are found everywhere. Women and their bodies can generally sell any product starting with food and ending with cars. Successful actresses and television presenters are increasingly young, tall and slim. Some of them often faint on the movie sets because of the drastic diets they are on to "look good on screen". Women's magazines are full of articles claiming that weight loss will fulfil the dreams of all readers who will have the perfect marriage, loving children, extraordinary sexual life, and a wonderful career. In spite of the diversity in their personal or public life, women are invariably seen as the aestheticized genre, that type of person permanently attentive to her own image.

We wonder why these standards are imposed so often on women who generally do not have a perfect figure or have not reached adulthood? The causes of this phenomenon are, according to analysts, economic in nature. By presenting a feminine ideal hard to reach and maintain, the cosmetics and aesthetic industry in particular have a steady growth of profits ensured. It is also not an accident that youth is increasingly promoted alongside a slim figure as an essential criterion for a woman to be considered attractive. Even though not all women are overweight or willing to lose weight, all of them are certainly getting old, according to the 2001 report Quebec Action Network for Women's Health called *Changements sociaux en faveur de la diversité des images corporelles*. According to beauty industry specialists, aging is considered a disaster for a woman who makes money from her image. Hence, human frustrations and anxieties are speculated.

The stakes are very high. On the one hand, women who feel disadvantaged are likely to buy beauty products, new clothes, to resort to weight

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loss diets, or aesthetic surgery. It is estimated that the weight loss diet industry alone has an annual profit of over 100 billion dollars. On the other hand, research shows that continued reporting to an idealized image of a woman can lead consumers to depression, loss of self-esteem, and the adoption of an unhealthy lifestyle. The direct connection between aesthetics and consumption is obvious; publications help the fair sex with products and services, turning it into an active consumer. These publications play an important role in the development of the consumer society, especially through specialized editions aimed at a well-defined audience with specific interests and needs.

According to research by the specialists working with the American Institute Anorexia Nervosa & Related Eating Disorders Inc., one in four girls aged 18 to 22 uses at least one unhealthy method of losing unwanted kilos - eliminating main meals, over-exercise, laxative abuse. The Canadian Life Style Research Institute also warns that there are cases of slimming diets in very young girls. Statistics in the United States are similar, and in 2003, *Teen* magazine reported that 35% of girls aged 6 to 12 had at least one slimming diet, and between 50 and 70% of them think they are overweight. In addition, according to JJ. Brumberg, over 78% of adolescents aged between 12 and 17 say they are dissatisfied with the way they look, aspire to perfect bodies, to successful careers that provide them with visibility and material guarantees.

Jean Kilbourne, a prominent US women's rights activist, concludes: ”Women are basically sold to the beauty industry by the magazines they read and the television channels they watch, most of them making them feel overweight or old”.

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2INTANGIBLE BEAUTY AND PERFECT FIGURE CULTURE

In Romania, there has not yet been any accurate statistics on the proliferation of this type of femininity, but the trends are becoming more and more obvious.

Perhaps the most important issue is that advertising and the media generally promote a feminine ideal that most women cannot reach. A group of researchers who computer-generated a woman with the Barbie doll's proportions concluded that her back is too fragile to support the upper body, and the size of the waist would not allow her to have more than half a liver and a bladder of a few centimetres. A woman of these proportions would suffer from atrocious back pain and eventually die from malnutrition.

However, the number of women and girls who want perfect size is growing, with devastating consequences for their health, but the aspiration to enter the media is a mirage that deserves any sacrifice.

Advertisements in women's magazines are presented in two forms: a *direct* one (traditional advertising) and an *indirect* one (with a double subclass: paid or unpaid). They resort to subtle discursive techniques through which messages are transmitted by means of visual elements and a specific rhetoric, in other words a way to transfer prevalent *patterns* from magazines into everyday life, behaviour, and value judgements.

The message promoted here about the impeccable image is different for women than it is for men. In the case of women, unlike men, emphasis is placed on the physical image, where a slim body is equivalent to beauty, high ability to attract the opposite sex, and a successful career.

To reinforce this claim, researchers Anderson and DiDomenico conducted a comparative analysis study of ten women's magazines and ten men's

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magazines. They wanted to find out if there was a match between the number of articles focused on diets and the increasing number of those who were suffering from eating disorders. The results showed that the ten women's magazines contained much more articles and advertisements focused on diets than those focused on men. The ratio between the number of such articles in men's magazines and women's magazines was 1:10, identical to that of men and women who suffered from eating disorders at the time in the United States. The two researchers have shown that the articles in men's magazines that touched upon physical image focused on body modelling, whereas the same type of articles in women's magazines focused on body weight.

Also, over three quarters of the women's magazine covers contain at least one title on how to change the body - through diet, exercise or cosmetic surgery.

Cinematographic and television productions also highlight the importance of a slim body as a measure of a woman's value. Canadian researcher Gregory Fouts, head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary, says that over three quarters of women appearing in TV series are underweight and just one in 20 is overweight. In addition, the characters interpreted by overweight women often receive ironic replies about the circumference of their waist by male characters ("What would you say if you were wearing a bag?"), and more than 80% of these comments are followed by the registered laughter of the audience.

Actions have been taken, although isolated, to change the tendency of showing only beautiful women. For several years, the Canadian magazine *Coup de Pouce* has consistently published, in the fashion column, photographs of women of normal weight or overweight and the *Châtelaine* magazine has assured readers that it will not publish any retouched photographs or models under 25 years.

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However, advertising leads the market and shapes consumers' preferences, and in advertising the slim woman is “fashionable”, which is increasingly visible in Romanian media as well. 25 years ago, an average model weighed 8% less than a normal woman, but now models weigh 23% less than a regular woman. Advertising people think slimmer women sell their products better. When the Australian magazine *New Woman* published the photo of overweight model on the cover, many letters were received from the readers praising the initiative. However, the “advertisers” complained about this measure, and the magazine was forced to go back to publishing photos of slim models. Representatives of the magazine specialized in advertising, *Advertising Age International,* said that this incident “has clearly shown the influence of strong advertising companies whose specialists are still convinced that only slim models increase sales for beauty products”.

The stereotypical image of womanhood is promoted, as shown, through advertising. The media dictate the needs, attitudes and behaviour of each consumer.

This is why the attributes of a quality life remain just an illusion for the kind of consumer who has a unique dream to identify with the promoted models.

3CONCLUSION

In this article, we highlighted the role of stereotypes, especially feminine ones, the direct expression of values and beliefs in a society in which the psychic clichés approached operate on the principle of self-motivating predictions that can form prejudices and discrimination against certain categories of people. That's why it is good to know them and to be aware of them.

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