



Female role stereotypes in print advertising

Identifying associations with magazine and product categories

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is three-fold: to provide recent evidence in the UK on the frequency of appearance of female role portrayals in print advertisements; to compare female role stereotypes across magazine types; and to explore the interface between female role stereotypes and product categories.

Design/methodology/approach – An integrative approach to content analysis was used in order to analyze advertising communication in print media. The sample consisted of $n = 3,830$ advertisements published in ten high circulation UK magazines.

Findings – The study indicates that women in UK magazine advertisements are mainly portrayed in decorative roles; and that female role stereotypes vary significantly across magazine types. The findings also suggest that there is an association between product categories and female role stereotypes.

Practical implications – The study highlights the need for the advertising industry in the UK to adjust its communication practices to the changing role of women in society.

Originality/value – The study extends research in the area of female role stereotypes in print advertising by considering the frequency of female role portrayals across different magazine types; and investigating the association between product categories and female role stereotypes.

Keywords Advertising, Magazines, Women, Prejudice, Sexual discrimination, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Advertising characterized by a special focus on visual cues such as expression, posture and gesture reflects to a great extent social values, prevailing norms, beliefs and stereotypes of society. In certain cases, images in advertising act as an agent in reinforcing and reshaping society's norms and beliefs, appreciation of "good life" and depiction of sexuality (Pollay, 1986; Martin and Gentry, 1997). Relevant literature (Cortese, 1999; Lazar, 2006; Kilbourne, 1999; Lysonski, 1985) indicates that advertising clearly contributes to gender inequality by promoting "sexism" and distorted body image ideals as valid and acceptable. Sexism refers to the portrayal of women and men in an inferior manner relative to their capabilities and potential.

The emphasis of the current study on female role stereotypes in print advertisements can be viewed in the context of the debate around media and post-feminism discourse. Specifically, modern media are filled with stories of "genderquake" (in favour of women), which promote the rhetoric and symbolism of



female empowerment and personal freedom. Yet, contemporary media also endorse the appearance of women's bodies through the use of "retro-sexist" imagery of women in advertising (Gill and Arthurs, 2006). Retro-sexism as a social and stylistic phenomenon is based on the communication of culturally sanctioned aspects of femininity related to notions of dependency, attractiveness, and adherence to household tasks (Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003). Whereas some neo-feminists suggest that retro-sexism in advertising appears to empower women, other have posited that such a phenomenon serves as a backlash against feminism (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006).

The current study draws evidence from the UK context, which represents "a society where images of women as objects proliferate and yet conflict with the popular account of a world riven by a 'genderquake'" (Whelehan, 2000, p. 3). It is also interesting to undertake such a research in the UK, which, although classified by Hofstede (2001) as a "masculine" society, has increasingly witnessed a high level of interest in gender role portrayal in advertising since the 1970s (Macdonald, 1995). This interest has been supported by governmental agencies (e.g. the Equal Opportunity Commission and the National Centre for Social Research), non-profit institutions (e.g. Advertising Standards Authority), educational institutions, and business and consumer organizations. Highlighting, further, the importance of female representations in society and media, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has funded a series of interdisciplinary seminars held in the UK on the theme of "New Femininities". It appears that British women have been gradually rejecting outdated ideas regarding their gender roles (Rich, 2005). Nevertheless, despite all their achievements, they are employed in a narrower range of jobs than British men, earn 10 percent less than their male colleagues and are less likely to ever reach the top of their fields at work (UN, 2000).

The purpose of this study is threefold. First, it seeks to provide recent evidence on the frequency of appearance of female role portrayals in print advertisements, drawing insights from British women, men and general audience consumer magazines. Past studies dating back to the 1960s have considered gender issues in advertising but provided conflicting evidence regarding the depiction of women in media (Taylor *et al.*, 2005). The majority of these studies have been conducted in the USA, even though most criticism about the stereotypical depiction of women in advertising appeared to stem from Europe (Macdonald, 1995; UN, 2000). The emergence of retro-sexism, however, highlights the premise that female role stereotyping is not solely a 1960s or 1970s phenomenon, but rather a contemporary global problem (Bordo, 1995). Therefore, the current study builds upon recommendations of marketing scholars (e.g. Wolin, 2003; Zinkhan, 1994) and gender analysts (Bordo, 1995; Gill and Arthurs, 2006; Whelehan, 2000) who suggest that recent evidence is required in order to enrich the area of female role portrayals and document trends with respect to changes, if any, in images of women in print media.

Second, the present study investigates whether female role portrayals in print advertisements vary among different magazine types in the UK. Relevant literature examining female stereotypes in advertising appears to draw insights from female audience publications in the USA without considering how notions of gender and sexuality are expressed in thematically differing media vehicles (Ferguson *et al.*, 1990). In order to address this issue, we follow the suggestion of Hirschman and Thompson (1997) who posit that types of female images in advertising are likely to be entwined

with the content of advertising media. Such an effort may highlight the importance of “synergies” in advertising, i.e. the fact that advertising messages operate and are made meaningful within the broader content of a magazine.

Third, the current research investigates the interface between female role stereotypes, on the one hand, and hedonic and utilitarian product categories, on the other. Hedonic products are related mainly to sensory attributes, whereas utilitarian products are linked primarily to functional characteristics experienced by individuals in the consumption process (Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Crowley *et al.*, 1992). Relevant literature (Courtney and Whipple, 1983; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990; Wolin, 2003) has provided some preliminary ideas regarding the possible linkage of female portrayals and product categories without, however, offering any empirical insights. Hence, the present research extends the literature by integrating product specific notions into the examination of female role stereotypes in print media and providing evidence on whether female role stereotypes and product categories are indeed associated.

In summary, this research updates and extends the work of Lysonski (1985) and Mitchell and Taylor (1990) conducted in the UK by:

- considering the frequency of female role portrayals and explaining whether these portrayals have become more progressive;
- examining the depiction of women across different magazine types; and
- investigating the association between product categories and female role stereotypes.

Our paper begins with a literature review on the key notion of this study, namely female role stereotypes; and, development of research propositions. Following a discussion of the methodology adopted in this study, its findings are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications as well as directions for further research.

2. Theoretical background

Gender stereotypes are general beliefs about sex-linked traits and roles, psychological characteristics and behaviours describing men and women (Browne, 1998). Gender identities are socially constructed and advertising suggests lifestyles and forms of self-presentation that individuals use to define their roles in society (Giddens, 1991; Wolf, 1991). The resurgence of feminist thought in the 1960s called attention to the portrayals of women in advertising and promoted systematic investigation into the area of female role stereotypes in popular media. Particularly, it suggested that advertising in popular media has been a primary means for introducing and promoting female role stereotypes and sexism, calling attention for systematic investigation into this area. Whereas the 1960s and 1970s largely experienced the development of the feminist perspective, the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the emergence of a viewpoint that gradually weakened the arguments of feminist thought (Williamson, 2003).

During the 1990s, the notions of feminism and sexism were considered to be outdated, and issues of sexuality rather than gender became the focus of discourse and debate. During this period, sexual imagery of women is viewed as radical and cutting-edge rather than unfair and exploitative. The new representational approach of retro-sexism appears to extend beyond media imagery to society at large (Gill and Arthurs, 2006). Retro-sexism differs from earlier sexual representations of women in

the 1960s and 1970s inasmuch as it has assimilated feminist criticism against sexist advertising to promote “commercial femininities” in the service of commodity consumption (Lazar, 2006, p. 505).

The issues raised by gender scholars have provided a basis for academic research in the area of marketing in order to explore the degree to which advertising accurately reflects contemporary roles of women rather than depicting women in a stereotypical way (Kerin *et al.*, 1979). Content analysis was applied frequently to examine such role portrayals in these studies. Table I presents a list of illustrative studies undertaken in the USA and Europe, and indicates that the evidence regarding the role of women in print media is conflicting. In other words, there is a body of literature that argues in favour of an increasing bias toward the stereotypical depiction of women in print advertisements, whereas several other studies suggest that female role stereotyping seems to be decreasing over time. The majority of these studies took place in the 1970s and early 1980s, while recent empirical evidence on this research area appears to be lacking.

To illustrate, relevant research conducted in the USA on magazine advertising highlighted the increasing use of stereotypical images of women in print advertisements (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockertz, 1971; Lysonski, 1983; Poe, 1976; Sexton and Haberman, 1974). For instance, the seminal study of Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) provided a longitudinal perspective of female role stereotypes in print media from 1958 to 1970 and 1972. The findings demonstrated that women were primarily portrayed in traditional and decorative roles, and hence, female role portrayals in print advertising have not changed to reflect the evolving role of women in society. Apart from enumerating female roles stereotypes, Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) discussed the need for further scrutiny on product categories and female role portrayals. Similarly, Sexton and Haberman (1974) suggested that women in advertising are shown in domestic tasks and concerned with physical attractiveness, and are placed in predictable environments such as household settings. This finding corroborated the evidence of relevant studies conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s, which illustrated that print advertising portrayed women in domestic and decorative roles, having limited purchasing power and pictured primarily for display or aesthetic purposes (e.g. Lysonski, 1983; Ferguson *et al.*, 1990; Ruggiero and Weston, 1985).

Contrary to evidence in favour of proliferation of female role stereotypes in print advertising, other US studies reported decreasing stereotyping of women in print media (Klassen *et al.*, 1993; Lysonski, 1983; Venkatesan and Losco, 1975; Wagner and Banos, 1973). For example, Venkatesan and Losco studied the role of women in print advertisements for the period 1959-1971 and concluded that the depiction of women as sex objects has considerably decreased since 1961. Likewise, Klassen *et al.* (1993) suggested that since the early 1980s traditional depictions of women in print media in the USA have been decreasing, but still were used extensively in print advertisements.

The extant literature in Europe provided also conflicting findings on the role of women in print advertising. Specifically, Lysonski (1985) examined female role portrayals in print advertisements appearing in female, male and general audience magazines in the UK. The findings suggested that women were predominantly shown as concerned about their physical attractiveness, housewives and objects of sexual gratification. A replication of this study by Mitchell and Taylor (1990) in female-oriented magazines illustrated a declining tendency of female stereotyping in

Authors	Period/context	Key findings
Belkazi and Belkazi (1976)	1958; 1970; 1972/USA	Stereotypes of dependency, sex objects and women making unimportant decisions; some moderation in housewife or mother stereotype
Courtney and Lockertz (1971)	1970/USA	Stereotypes of dependency, housewife, sex object and women making unimportant decisions
Ferguson et al. (1990)	1973-1987/USA	Women increasingly portrayed as sex objects
Goffman (1976)	1972-1989/USA	Women depicted in subordination to male models and in licensed withdrawal from the physical scene of the advertisement
Klassen <i>et al.</i> (1993)	1972-1989/USA	Disproportionately high number of advertisements that portrayed women in traditional roles; yet there is progress toward depiction of women
Lyonski (1983)	1974-1975; 1979-1980/USA	Women shown less frequently as dependent upon men and more frequently as career-oriented
Lyonski (1985)	1976; 1982-1983/UK	Women are depicted concerned with physical attractiveness; yet there is progress toward depiction of women
Mitchell and Taylor (1990)	1988/UK	Women depicted concerned with physical attractiveness and as housewives
Piron and Young (1996)	1986, 1989 and 1992/Germany and USA	Role portrayal of women in both countries has become more subdued
Poe (1976)	1928, 1956, 1972/USA	Women depicted less in competitive sports and more in recreational situations from 1928 to 1972
Ruggiero and Weston (1985)	1971-1980/USA	Women less frequently portrayed as having responsibility and power; women are frequently depicted in traditional occupations
Sexton and Haberman (1974)	1950-51; 1960-61; 1970-71/USA	No significant changes in stereotyping of women; women primarily depicted in decorative roles
Venkatesan and Losco (1975)	1959-1971/USA	The portrayal of women as sex objects has decreased
Wagner and Banos (1973)	1972/USA	Moderation in stereotypes identified by Courtney and Lockertz
Wiles <i>et al.</i> (1995)	Early 1990s/The Netherlands, Sweden, USA	Women depicted primarily in decorative roles in Dutch and US magazines
Zotos and Lyonski (1994)	1992-1993/Greece	Women depicted in recreational and domestic roles in Sweden
Zotos <i>et al.</i> (1996)	1982-1983 and 1987-1988/Italy	Women shown in non-active and decorative roles
Source: The authors		Women depicted concerned with physical attractiveness

Table I.
Illustrative literature in magazine advertisements

domestic and sex object roles, yet images of women in decorative roles appeared to dominate the sample of advertisements. The authors also suggested that the comprehension of female representations in advertising might benefit from the study of female role stereotypes in association to product categories (Mitchell and Taylor, 1990). In a similar vein, a cross-cultural study of Piron and Young (1996) in Germany and the US illustrated that role portrayals of women in both countries have become more subdued.

Research conducted by Zotos *et al.* (1996) in Italy revealed a downturn in professional roles and a frequent use of the physical attractiveness imagery for depicting females in print advertisements. In the Greek context, Zotos and Lysonski (1994) proposed that advertisements in Greece did not seem to be responsive to the changing careers and roles of women. They argued that although the appearance of women in household roles and as dependent on men has decreased substantially, still females were likely to be shown in non-active and decorative roles in print advertisements.

To sum up, previous studies have provided useful insights regarding female role stereotypes in print media, yet there appear to emerge three themes that require further investigation:

- (1) a contradiction in the empirical evidence regarding the depictions of women in print advertising, i.e. various studies suggest that stereotypical representations of women in advertising are decreasing while others the opposite;
- (2) a scarcity of recent empirical evidence in the area of female role portrayals in advertising; and
- (3) a need to explore the interface of female role stereotypes and product categories, namely which product categories are likely to relate to stereotypical images of women in print advertising (Dow and Condit, 2005; Wolin, 2003).

3. Research propositions

In outlining the propositions of the study, we classify the categories of female role stereotypes under four broader themes, namely women in decorative roles, women in traditional roles, women in non-traditional roles and women portrayed equal to men. This classification of female stereotypes under the four themes aims at the facilitation of presentation of propositions and discussion of findings of the study. Table II illustrates the categories of female role stereotypes and their classification under the broader groups. The classification of stereotypes in four broader themes and the categories for female role stereotypes are consistent with the extant literature that examines stereotyping in print media (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990; Lysonski, 1985; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994); and, recent articles that discuss female representations in communication practices (Carter and Steiner, 2004; Cortese, 1999; Dow and Condit, 2005; Plakoyiannaki *et al.*, 2008).

3.1 Frequency of female role portrayals: research objective 1

Relevant literature in Europe and the USA has discussed the increasing depiction of women in decorative roles. For instance, evidence from Lysonski (1985) in the British context illustrated that women were commonly depicted in decorative roles, notably “concerned with physical attractiveness” and “sex objects”. Particularly, his study

Category	Description
<i>Women in traditional roles</i>	
1. Dependency	Dependent on male's protection; In need of reassurance; Making unimportant decisions
2. Housewife	Women's place is at home; primary role is to be a good wife; concerned with tasks of housekeeping
<i>Women in decorative roles</i>	
3. Women concerned with physical attractiveness	Women in pursuit of beauty and physical attractiveness (e.g. youthful)
4. Women as sex objects	Sex is related to product; sex is unrelated to product
<i>Women in non-traditional roles</i>	
5. Women in non-traditional activities	Engaged in activities outside the home (e.g. golf, football)
6. Career-oriented women	Professional occupations; entertainer; non-professional; Blue-collar
7. Voice of authority	The expert
<i>Women portrayed as equal to men</i>	
8. Neutral	Women shown as equal to men

Sources: Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976); Mitchell and Taylor (1990); Lysonski (1985); Zotos and Lysonski (1994)

Table II. Categories for female role stereotypes

registered an increase in the portrayal of women in decorative roles in all the magazines from 67 percent in 1976 to 75.3 percent in 1982-1983. This trend was also reflected on studies conducted in Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Sweden and the USA, which reported an increase in the use of the themes of physical attractiveness and sex object for depicting women in print advertising (Gauntlett, 2002; Piron and Young, 1996; Wiles *et al.*, 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994). Thus:

P1. The current study is likely to show an increase of female models portrayed in decorative roles.

The study of Lysonski (1985) indicated a marginal decrease in the use of traditional roles of women in advertising including those of housewife and dependency upon man. A follow-up study by Mitchell and Taylor (1990) documented a frequent use of the traditional home-related portrayal of women in print advertising in the British context. Similarly, Wiles *et al.* (1995) observed a frequent portrayal of women concerned with domestic tasks in Sweden. These findings bear similarity with those of relevant research in the US that showed a disproportionately high number of advertisements that depicted women in traditional poses relative to advertisements that portrayed men and women as equals (Klassen *et al.*, 1993). Recently, Dow and Condit (2005) suggested that women were socialized and trained to cater the need of others, a stereotype that is still communicated and reinforced through advertising messages. Macdonald (1995) postulated that advertising discourse in the UK increasingly endorsed female models who found domestic chores (e.g. decorating and interior design, gardening, preparation of healthy meals) a relaxing alternative to work outside the home. Hence:

P2. The current study is likely to show an increase of female models portrayed in traditional roles.

As far as the portrayal of women in non-traditional roles is concerned, the extant literature suggested that women were seldom depicted in working functions including high-level executives, decision-makers and entrepreneurs (Wiles *et al.*, 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Zotos *et al.*, 1996). This finding was also supported by Ruggiero and Weston (1985) who found that women profiled in high circulation magazines were less likely to occupy job positions with power and increased responsibilities. The study of Lysonski (1985) found a marginal shift regarding the depiction of women in non-traditional roles. Particularly, his findings demonstrated that the themes “women in non-traditional activities”, “voice of authority” and “career-oriented women” described a small fraction of the sample of advertisements in British magazines, notably 7.1 percent in 1976 and 6.7 percent in 1982-1983 (Lysonski, 1985). According to the same study, the results of the neutral category whereby women and men appeared as equals showed also a downward shift. Based on the above analysis:

- P3. The current study is likely to show a decrease of female models portrayed in non-traditional roles.
- P4. The current study is likely to show a decrease of female models portrayed as equal to men.

3.2 Female role portrayals across different magazine types: research objective 2

This study considers three magazine types, i.e. female, male and general audience publications in an effort to provide evidence of female role stereotypes across titles with different editorial contents and readership (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997). Early work in the area of female stereotyping contributed valuable insights into the depiction of women in advertisements, yet without analyzing variations of findings across magazine types (e.g. Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockertz, 1971). However, research in the mid-1980s and 1990s reported female portrayals to be skewed toward certain types of magazines. Specifically, the literature focusing on female representations in women’s magazines (Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Ferguson *et al.*, 1990; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990) has shown that women were primarily depicted in decorative roles, namely sex objects and concerned with their physical attractiveness. For instance, a longitudinal study of Ferguson *et al.* (1990) that examined print advertisements in *Ms. Magazine* suggested that women were increasingly portrayed as sex objects perhaps in an attempt of advertisers to evoke emotions to readers. Macdonald (1995) argued that prestigious female-oriented publications in the UK tended to employ exotic and atmospheric locations, and cast their models in sculpted and sensual poses shaping the readers’ perceptions of lifestyle. It may be inferred from the above that:

- P5. Female audience magazines are likely to portray female models in decorative roles.

Fewer studies have discussed the depiction of women in male or general audience magazines. Evidence from the British context indicated that male audience magazines predominantly depicted women in non-traditional roles over the periods 1976 and 1982-1983 (Lysonski, 1985). This is consistent with research in the Greek (Zotos and Lysonski, 1994) and Italian (Zotos *et al.*, 1996) contexts, which demonstrated that male audience magazines increasingly used images of women in non-traditional roles

including career-oriented women and women as experts. Lysonski (1985) also proposed that general audience magazines frequently portrayed women as equal to men in an attempt to appeal to their mixed readership. Therefore:

- P6. Male audience magazines are likely to portray female models in non-traditional roles.
- P7. General audience magazines are likely to portray female as equal to men.

3.3 Female role portrayals across different product categories: research objective 3

Thus far, there seems to be scarce evidence on the frequency and prominence of female stereotypes across different product categories (Wolin, 2003). Relevant literature has primarily approached the use of female role stereotypes in advertising as an isolated phenomenon reporting solely frequencies of appearance of female images in print media. Viewed in this light, Goffman (1976) has pointed out that the study of female portrayals in advertisements should not concentrate merely on uncovering prevalent gender patterns but rather one should also consider key elements of the advertising message, including the product. The examination of products is important since they are signifiers of meanings (Lazar, 2006; Williamson, 1978). Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the interface of product categories and female role stereotypes since a product category may be associated with the reinforcement of a specific stereotype.

A bidimensional approach to understanding product categories has been adopted by Batra and Ahtola (1991) as well as Crowley *et al.* (1992) who proposed that product categories can be classified in terms of hedonic or utilitarian elements. Hedonic products are primarily related to sensory attributes and concentrate on consumatory effective gratification, whereas utilitarian products are mainly associated with functional and non-sensory attributes and focus on fulfilment of instrumental needs. The hedonic-utilitarian categorization of product categories has been applied successfully to consumer/advertising research (Crowley *et al.*, 1992; Olney *et al.*, 1991) and has offered a greater understanding on consumer behaviour by decomposing individuals' perceptions of product categories into two meaningful and measurable elements. Following recommendations of the relevant literature (Babin *et al.*, 1994; Batra and Ahtola, 1991; Crowley *et al.*, 1992), the current study examines seven hedonic and five instrumental product categories:

- (1) recreation and travel;
- (2) auto and related products;
- (3) jewellery;
- (4) high-tech devices;
- (5) apparel;
- (6) cosmetics;
- (7) movies and entertainment;
- (8) food and drinks;
- (9) household items (e.g. cleaning detergents);
- (10) personal hygiene;

- (11) financial services; and
- (12) home appliances.

Hedonic product categories may be either associated with decorative and traditional or non-traditional and neutral representations of women. For example, an advertisement of a popular cosmetic portrayed the female model in a bending body posture that conveyed dependency to the male counterpart who was depicted holding his body erect and extending his arm to the female model. However, advertisements of cosmetics may also show women in non-traditional roles, which feature as successful professionals that endorse the product to consumers in an attempt to catch attention of the audience. Utilitarian products may be also linked to multiple female stereotypes including decorative, traditional, non-traditional and neutral images of women. For instance, financial services products may be promoted through advertisements that communicate roles of women in household tasks or depictions of women as entrepreneurs starting up their own companies. The association between female role stereotypes and product categories seems also to be dependent upon contingency factors such as competition, PLC, advertising objectives and target audiences (Vakratsas and Abler, 1999). Based on the above, the authors can expect an association between product categories and categories of female role stereotypes but cannot predict its specific direction. Hence:

- P8.* There is likely to be an association between product categories and female role stereotypes.

4. Methodology

In order to address the research propositions of the study, the authors needed a method for enumerating the types of female portrayals featuring in the content of consumer magazine advertisements. Content analysis was chosen because it is the best at providing “a scientific, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications content” (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 10). Particularly, in order to analyze advertising communication in print media, we applied an integrative approach to content analysis (Naccarato and Neuendorf, 1998), which combines message-related and audience-centered variables. The former group of variables refers to female role stereotypes, whereas the latter group concerns the three categories of magazine audiences.

The study reported in this paper has been conducted with care given to content analysis standards (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). The content analysis instrument of female role stereotypes (Table II) combined a variety of female portrayals ranging from the depiction of women as sex symbols to authority figures and professionals; whereas the classification of product categories included hedonic and utilitarian products. The sample for the content analysis was drawn from the population of advertisements with size of more than one third of a page, which were found in consumer magazines published in 2004-2005 in the UK. Especially, in print advertising, female role portrayals can be systematically observed because the creator of an advertisement has only very little space to appeal to the audience and needs to work with strong but simple symbols, such as gender stereotypes to communicate a message (Goffman, 1976). The sampling frame was constructed from a list of consumer magazines by type and included ten high circulation British magazines that were grouped into three basic

categories, namely: female; male; and general audience, according to their general readership (Table III). These magazines were monthly publications and included 120 issues. The Key Note Report on Consumer Magazines (Key Note, 2003) was used for the selection of magazines based on readership and circulation.

The total number of the advertisements described by stereotypical representations of women was 3,830. For an advertisement that featured more than one stereotype, it was recorded according to the dominant stereotype. The magazines included in the study were monthly publications.

Four male and four female coders were trained to content analyze the advertisements into the categories shown in Table III. During training sessions the authors clearly explained the key concepts and conceptual categories of the study. They also allocated codebooks and coding forms including guidelines, definitions and tables for data input linked to content analysis of print advertisements. In order to ensure the reliability of the coding process, the coders practiced content analyzing 100 advertisements (pilot coding) prior to the main study so as to learn how to use the instrument (Weber, 1990). Pilot coding served to eliminate differences in the interpretation of conceptual categories and promoted consensus among coders. Final coding was conducted by each coder individually. Particularly, the coders worked independently upon the sample of the study ($n = 3,830$) and classified the advertisements by categories of female stereotypes and product class.

Perreault and Liegh's (1989) reliability index was calculated for the group of coders. The operational range of values for this index is between 0.0 (no reliability) and 1.0 (perfectly reliable). The estimated reliability of the current study for the category decisions across all advertisements included in the sample was 0.92 for type of female stereotypes, and 0.93 for product class. These two figures show that the reliability of the coding process is high. In order to investigate propositions *P5-P9*, the authors conducted one-way ANOVA and cross-tabulation analysis.

5. Findings

5.1 Frequency of female role portrayals: research objective 1

Examination of the data relating to research propositions *P1-P4* that concentrated on the types of role portrayals used to depict women in British magazine advertisements suggested that women were primarily portrayed in decorative roles, notably "concerned with physical attractiveness" and as "sex objects". Table IV provides the total frequencies for the role portrayals of women in all magazines examined in the UK, while Table V illustrates the total frequencies of hedonic and utilitarian product categories appearing in the advertisements.

According to the findings, images of women in decorative roles referred approximately to the three quarters of the sample of advertisements. Specifically, stereotypes of women "concerned with physical attractiveness" and "sex object" featured in 45.90 and 31.52 percent of the sample, respectively. These findings in Table IV resemble those of relevant literature that report increasing stereotypical depiction of women in decorative roles (Wiles *et al.*, 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Zotos *et al.*, 1996). On the contrary, they are in disagreement with the evidence provided by Mitchell and Taylor (1990), who found a downturn in the use of decorative roles of women in magazine advertisements in the UK. Thus, proposition *P1* that predicted an increase of female models depicted in decorative roles was supported.

Table III.
Description of magazines

Magazine title/publisher	Description of content	Circulation in (000s) Period: July- December 2002
<i>Female audience magazines</i> <i>Vogue</i> /Condé Nast	Fashion, beauty, interviews, art and design; it appeals to sophisticated and stylish women of all ages (20-60 years old)	202,108
<i>Cosmopolitan</i> /NMC	Sex, relationships, fashion, beauty tips and career; articles relate to themes such as "your hottest holiday sex confessions" or "meet the lusty lifeguards of Britain"; it appeals to "liberated" women of 20s and over	463,058
<i>Marie Claire</i> /European News	Fashion and beauty, relationships, real stories, sex and health plus one or two serious major issues per month; its readership extends from adolescents to middle-aged women	400,038
<i>Practical Parenting</i>	All areas of pregnancy, birth, babies and preschoolers; its issue offers advice to solve problems and worries as a mum or mum-to-be	54,062
<i>Zest</i> /NMC	Beauty, health and fitness information; a clever packaging of looks, sex, relationships, diets, physiology and lifestyle appealing to health- and appearance-conscious women in their 20s-40s	115,081
<i>Male audience magazines</i> <i>GQ</i> /Condé Nast	Up-market men's lifestyle magazine that appeals to younger and mature sophisticated audiences; women in bikinis; expensive fashion advice; some decent articles of social nature	123,502
<i>FHM</i> /EMAP	Relationships and everyday life, advice on sex, interviews and reviews, women in bikinis; all its columns are delivered with a good sense of humour that appeals to audiences between 20 and 30 years old	620,226
<i>Loaded</i> /IPC media	Predictable masculine themes including sport, drinking, some "joke" sexism; plus fashion; appeals to a single guy who can go out and "have a laugh"	290,214
<i>General audience magazines</i> <i>Condé Nast Traveller</i> /Condé Nast	Travel, expensive men's and women's fashion, articles on holiday destinations, lifestyle; it appeals to those who travel in style; its readership includes men and women between 25 to 55 years old	41,067
<i>The Face</i> /EMAP	Lifestyle, men's and women's fashion, music, culture, art and design plus technology gadgets and media; its readership includes men and women between 20 to 35 years old	42,242

Sources: Gauntlett (2002); Key Notes (2003)

Category of stereotype	Absolute value (current study) <i>n</i> = 3,830	Frequency (current study) <i>n</i> = 3,830 (%)	Mitchell and Taylor (1988) ^a <i>n</i> = 389 (%)	Lyonski (1982-1983) <i>n</i> = 1,026 (%)	Lyonski (1976) <i>n</i> = 793 (%)
<i>Women in traditional roles</i>					
1. Dependency	177	4.62	7.7	3.5	5.0
2. Housewife	224	5.85	19.8	8.4	12.6
<i>Women in decorative roles</i>					
3. Women concerned with physical attractiveness	1,758	45.90	42.4	58.4	50.2
4. Women as sex objects	1,207	31.52	11.1	16.9	16.8
<i>Women in non-traditional roles</i>					
5. Women in non-traditional activities	160	4.18	6.7	2.2	1.4
6. Career-oriented women	66	1.72	3.6	3.1	4.4
7. Voice of authority	113	2.95	4.1	1.4	1.3
<i>Women portrayed as equal to men</i>					
8. Neutral ^b	125	3.26	4.6	6.1	8.3

Notes: ^a See references; Mitchell and Taylor (1990) and Lyonski (1985); ^b The category "neutral" incorporates representations of women equal to men and "none of the above categories" representations for the studies of Mitchell and Taylor (1990) and Lyonski (1985)

Table IV.
Frequency of female role stereotypes

Table V.
Summary of product
categories

Product categories	Absolute value <i>n</i> = 3,830	Frequency (%) <i>n</i> = 3,830
<i>Hedonic products</i>		
1. Recreation and travel	186	4.86
2. Auto and related products	78	2.04
3. Jewellery	212	5.53
4. High-tech devices	158	4.13
5. Apparel	1,032	26.94
6. Cosmetics	1,290	33.68
7. Movies and entertainment	170	4.44
<i>Utilitarian products</i>		
8. Food and drinks	131	3.42
9. Household items (e.g. detergents)	63	1.65
10. Personal hygiene	381	9.95
11. Financial services	70	1.82
12. Home appliances	59	1.54
Total	3,830	100.00

In terms of the depiction of women in traditional portrayals, this study indicated that role stereotypes of “dependence” and “housewife” represented on aggregate a 10.47 percent of the sample. Hence, the findings in Table IV demonstrated a decrease in the use of traditional role stereotypes in advertising comparing with the evidence provided by Mitchell and Taylor (1990) and Lysonski (1985). Based on the above, proposition P2 that predicted an increase of female models portrayed in traditional roles was not supported.

In spite of the frequent depiction of women in decorative roles, portrayals of women in non-traditional roles described a small fraction of the total number of advertisements. Specifically, women in non-traditional activities appeared in 4.18 percent of the advertisements, career-oriented women in 1.72 percent and women as voice of authority in 2.95 percent. These findings corroborate the evidence of relevant research (e.g. Wiles *et al.*, 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Zotos *et al.*, 1996) that highlighted the infrequent portrayal of women in non-traditional roles. Therefore, proposition P3 that predicted a decrease of female models depicted in non-traditional roles was supported. As shown in Table IV, the portrayal of women as equal to men has decreased, a result that supports proposition P4 that predicted a decrease of female models portrayed as equal to male models.

To sum up, the data showed that British consumer magazines tend to promote a narrow ideal of femininity captured with the concept of the “perfect provocateur” (Cortese, 1999, p. 54); namely, an ideal image of women that displayed sexual seductiveness and desire, and physical attractiveness. Viewed in this light, women were likely to be shown to accommodate the needs of the “outer body” that referred to external appearance; rather than the “inner body” that referred to self-preservation, spirituality, emotional harmony and health (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994, p. 349). In essence, the ideal of femininity conveyed by print advertisements seemed to promote the resexualisation and recommodification of women’s body. Gill (2003) argues that the perpetuation of images that promote female sexual seductiveness and/or dominance

appear to have a backlash effect upon women and the women movement inasmuch as they offer women the promise of power by becoming objects of desire.

5.2. Female role portrayals across different magazine types: research objective 2

With reference to research propositions P5-P7, the findings suggested that there were significant differences on the way women were depicted in female, male and general audience magazines. Table VI provides an expanded view of women stereotypes for the three categories of magazines in the study. It also presents the ANOVA results and demonstrates that the difference of means is highly significant in stereotypes such as “dependency” ($p < 0.001$), “women as sex object” ($p < 0.04$), “voice of authority” ($p < 0.01$) and “neutral” ($p < 0.01$) across the three types of magazines.

In terms of female-oriented publications, the results showed a tendency toward embracing non-traditional female portrayals, including the depiction of women as authority figures. Particularly, the theme “voice of authority” was observed more frequently in female audience publications comparing with male and general audience magazines ($f_{\text{voiceofauthority}} = 3.40$ percent). Therefore, P5, which suggested that female audience magazines were likely to portray female models in decorative roles, was not supported. This finding seemed to contradict evidence of past studies in terms of the increasing use of decorative and traditional depictions of women in female-oriented magazine advertisements (Lysonski, 1985; Ferguson *et al.*, 1990; Taylor *et al.*, 2005; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994). However, it should be noted that the representation of women in non-traditional roles such as authority experts confirmed in the current study has been approached with scepticism by gender and media theorists (Gough-Yates, 2003; Lazar, 2006). Lazar (2006) suggested that such female portrayals appeared to empower women to seek for learning opportunities in order to become informed consumers. However, when linked to the acquisition of beauty

Categories of stereotypes	Women’s magazines (%)	Men’s magazines (%)	General audience magazines (%)
<i>Women in traditional roles</i>			
1. Dependency	2.88	15.87***	6.50
2. Housewife	7.00	1.66	0.31
<i>Women in decorative roles</i>			
3. Women concerned with physical attractiveness	51.75	9.97	36.95
4. Women as sex objects	28.68	52.61*	31.05
<i>Women in non-traditional roles</i>			
5. Women in non-traditional activities	3.67	6.40	6.21
6. Career-oriented women	0.94	4.02	6.21
7. Voice of authority	3.40**	0.23	2.17
<i>Women portrayed as equal to men</i>			
8. Neutral	1.68	9.24	10.60**
Total	100	100	100

Table VI. Women stereotypes across magazine categories – ANOVA results

Note: * Significant at the 0.05 level; ** Significant at the 0.01 level; *** Significant at the 0.001 level

skills and knowledge such portrayals reinscribed sexism by limiting women's role to the achievement of beauty expertise.

Likewise, stereotypes of "dependency" and "women as sex object" showed variation among the three magazines categories, with the highest frequency of appearance in male-oriented publications ($f_{\text{dependency}} = 15.87$ percent and $f_{\text{sexobject}} = 52.61$ percent). Thus, *P6* that hypothesized an association between male audience magazines and the depiction of women in non-traditional roles was not supported. Therefore, the current study contradicted past observations of Lysonski (1985) who found an increasing occurrence of depictions of women in non-traditional roles in men-oriented publications. The finding also mirrored those of relevant studies conducted in Greece, Italy, Japan (e.g. Taylor *et al.*, 2005; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Zotos *et al.*, 1996), which supported the view that male audience magazines tended to override messages of gender equality and promote women in decorative and traditional roles.

Consistent with Lysonski (1985) the data indicated that the theme "neutral" showed differences in terms of its appearance in the three magazine categories and featured most frequently in general audience magazines ($f_{\text{neutral}} = 10.64$ percent). Thus, *P7*, which assumed that general audience magazines were likely to portray females as equal to men, was supported. This finding may be explained by taking into consideration the mixed readership of general audience magazines and the effort of such publications to appeal to both genders.

Overall, one may infer that the consumer magazines industry in the UK included advertisements communicating multiple messages about the nature of femininity, seemingly fitting to the interests of different readership groups. And, yet the tensions between feminist viewpoints with respect to the "voice of authority" stereotype calls for further analysis of stereotype-product associations in print advertisements, a premise discussed in the following section of the findings.

5.3 Female role portrayals across different product categories: research objective 3

In order to explore *P8* the authors conducted a cross-tabulation analysis of female role stereotypes and product categories (Table VII). A chi-square test of independence indicated that the two variables were highly associated ($\chi^2 = 1158.8$, $p < 0.001$), a finding that supported *P8*. Specifically, the findings demonstrated that hedonic products were mainly associated with the depiction of women in decorative roles. Indeed, Table VII demonstrates that images of women concerned with physical attractiveness and sex objects seemed to have a dominant role in advertisements of hedonic product categories.

This finding may be explained by considering that decorative images of women seemed to arouse emotional cues and communicate notions of self-gratification and self-concept enhancement (Ford *et al.*, 1991), which are central attributes of the promise that hedonic products deliver to customers. In essence, Babbin *et al.* (1994) suggest that hedonic products embrace concepts of fantasy fulfilment and emotional pleasure promoted to consumers through advertising messages. Therefore, the association between decorative roles of women and hedonic product categories illustrated the attention that advertisers pay on orchestrating the emotional content of advertising messages in addition to other information aspects such as brand or store choice. Lazar (2006) critiqued such communication practices suggesting that depictions of women in advertisements of hedonic goods and especially beauty aids endorsed unrealistic and

Stereotype/product	Dependency (trad)	Housewife (trad)	Physical attr. (dec)	Sex object (dec)	Non-trad. (ntrad)	Career-orient (ntrad)	Voice author (ntrad)	Neutral	Total
<i>Hedonic</i>									
1. Recreation and travel	10	6	68	72	8	5	7	10	186
2. Auto and related products	5	8	15	21	12	6	5	6	78
3. Jewellery	11	9	90	75	5	5	12	5	212
4. High-tech devices	9	7	31	66	20	5	7	13	158
5. Apparel	63	32	485	366	36	5	12	33	1,032
6. Cosmetics	41	19	761	405	14	6	24	20	1,290
7. Movies and entertainment	10	8	37	85	13	5	7	5	170
<i>Utilitarian</i>									
8. Food and drinks	5	50	32	12	8	6	8	10	131
9. Household items	5	21	9	7	6	5	5	5	63
10. Personal hygiene	6	40	216	81	21	6	5	6	381
11. Financial services	5	10	8	8	12	7	15	5	70
12. Home appliances	7	14	6	9	5	5	6	7	59
Total	177	224	1,758	1,207	160	66	113	125	3,830

Note: $\chi^2 = 1,158.8$; $df = 77$

Table VII. Cross-tabulation: product categories and female role stereotypes

restrictive images of femininity based on physical attractiveness. Such an approach may marginalize women who refuse to be part of this consumer collective and position them as socially inadequate.

This study provided mixed findings with respect to utilitarian product categories and female role portrayals. Particularly, Table VII shows that advertisements of utilitarian products used dissimilar female role stereotypes including non-traditional, traditional and decorative representations of women. The use of female portrayals performing household or work related roles appeared to be linked to the concept of utilitarian consumer who is diligent, task-related and rational (Batra and Ahtola, 1991). This is in accordance with ideas of the relevant literature that associates utilitarian products to instrumental rather than emotional benefits (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). However, the current study also suggested that some utilitarian products such as food and drinks or household items were linked to portrayals of women in decorative roles. Perhaps this occurred because of an attempt of advertisers to differentiate such products from other commodities and enhance involvement of consumers in the consumption process. Based on the schema theory, such an incongruity between product categories and role stereotypes may encourage consumers to engage in more extensive processing of the advertising message and increase advertising effectiveness (Moorman *et al.*, 2002).

6. Conclusions

The three objectives of the study were:

- (1) to provide recent evidence on the frequency of appearance of female role portrayals in print advertisements;
- (2) to compare female stereotypes across magazine types; and
- (3) to explore the interface between female role stereotypes and product categories in the UK.

The findings provided interesting insights into female role stereotypes across different magazine types and product categories. First, the results indicated that women in British magazine advertisements were mainly portrayed in decorative roles (supporting the notion of retro-sexism). This finding adds to the body of literature that documented increasing bias toward the sexist depiction of women in print advertisements (e.g. Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Ferguson *et al.*, 1990; Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Ruggiero and Weston, 1985).

Second, the results showed a tendency of female audience magazines toward embracing non-traditional female images, namely depictions of women as authority figures. Nevertheless, the emerging scepticism with respect to the depiction of women as experts in female audience magazines indicated the different interpretations that advertising messages can have. The findings additionally suggested that male-oriented magazines seemed to promote women in decorative and traditional roles, while general audience magazines used female depictions of women shown equal to men. In general, the target audience of a magazine appeared to be related to female role stereotypes used in the advertisements in this magazine.

Third, the findings indicated that hedonic products were likely to be associated with depictions of women in decorative roles. Utilitarian products were linked to various female portrayals involving women in non-traditional, traditional and decorative

depictions. This is seemingly the first study to provide evidence concerning the link of product types and female roles, thus seeking to extend the related advertising literature.

The evidence suggested that decorative images of women such as sex objects and concerned with physical attractiveness appeared to perpetuate in UK print advertisements. Since magazine advertisements often mirror contemporary society, one would expect the sexist portrayal of women to have been moderated in recent times. This is especially due to the active participation of British women in the professional arena and the surge of female-led entrepreneurship in the UK (Hunt, 2004). It may be inferred from the above that perhaps advertising practices lag societal norms and the changing role of women in the society.

This study has significant ethical and marketing practice implications. Particularly, the results of this study raise significant concerns regarding the appreciation of women in British society. The stereotypical representation of females in magazine advertisements could negatively affect the self-confidence of British women and, hence limit their future aspirations and expectations for equity in compensation. Such representations have stimulated worldwide research into the impact of advertising on individuals' self-esteem and self-image, particularly among adolescent females (Martin and Kennedy, 1993; Martin and Gentry, 1997). The use of women as decorative sexual objects appears to belittle their liberation in society and contribute to their depersonalization. According to Kilbourne (1999), advertising has afflicted women with a range of problems including low self-esteem, eating disorders, binge drinking and domestic violence, which arise from an attempt of women to adapt to a false self in order to become more "feminine".

Furthermore, there is concern that advertising stereotyping can have a major influence on the sex role development of children since media exposure affects cognitive development, attitude formation and development and change, and socialization. Because the use of female role stereotypes is also manifested in advertising directed toward children, it further propagates these gender representations.

These problems appear to reflect on the modern British society, if one considers the blooming of cosmetic surgery industry during the last five years (Whelehan, 2000). Klassen *et al.* (1993) suggested the way that women were depicted in advertisements would continue to shape societal values regarding the "appropriate" roles they undertook in the society. Viewed in this light, advertisers should be aware of both the subtle and blatant cues communicated in advertisements and how these messages are likely to perpetuate female stereotypes. The negative influence of advertising may be possibly diminished by means of social institutions (e.g. public education) and individual efforts. These attempts can raise the awareness of consumers toward media manipulation, regulation of internationally recognized standards in advertising and journalism, counter-advertising and boycott of products promoted through gender degrading imagery. Although, this would be a tentative conclusion, we call the need for further investigation into these important issues.

One could argue that negative or sexist depictions of women in advertising may have an adverse effect on the image of companies that choose such an approach to promote their brands and products. The fact that a growing segment of women in the UK has a large discretionary income, emphasizes the importance of such claims. The extant literature suggests that modern women tend to be more critical of

advertisements that are inconsistent with their role orientation (Ford *et al.*, 1991, 1997). A relevant study (Ford *et al.*, 1991) conducted in a sample of upscale women demonstrated that 63 percent of the respondents expressed their intent to discontinue using a product associated with demeaning sexual stereotypes. This same study illustrated that women were agile to female role portrayals in advertising and this attitude might potentially reflect on the purchasing decisions. Viewed in this light, there appears to be a priority for advertising industry in the UK to adjust its communication practices to the changing role of women in society.

In addition, this study suggests several directions for research. First, future studies may examine the associations between product categories and women imagery, which is a relatively under-explored theme. This study provided some evidence suggesting that hedonic products are related to depictions of women in decorative roles. The impact on sales of such an advertising approach is also a theme deserving further attention. In other words, is such an advertising approach associated with high sales for firms marketing hedonic products? However, the current study offered mixed evidence on the link between utilitarian product categories and female role stereotypes. Future research attempts may provide refined findings regarding this interface.

Second, advertising in other countries can be examined in order to investigate whether the results of the current study can be generalized in a broader setting. Specifically, the evidence drawn from the UK suggests that there exists a trend toward the use of retro-sexist images for the depiction of females in contemporary print advertising (Gill, 2003; Williamson, 2003). Researchers can examine this issue in order to acquire a comprehensive picture regarding female stereotyping and explore factors that may inhibit progress toward role perceptions of women in advertising messages. Such an effort can be complemented by longitudinal research that may illuminate whether and how representations of women in print advertising have changed over time.

Third, little research has been undertaken to investigate the existence of gendered-biased language, spoken or written, in communication messages. This topic presents a research opportunity for marketing scholars taking into consideration that advertising language is an integral part of the entire advertising message, which complements and reinforces the pictorial elements of the advertisement.

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