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**IS GENDER STEREOTYPING IN ADVERTISING MORE PREVALENT IN
MASCULINE COUNTRIES? A CROSS-NATIONAL ANALYSIS**

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to test whether gender stereotyping in printed advertising is more prevalent in masculine as opposed to feminine countries. We consider this to be important, as advertising is generally more influential than literature in spreading stereotypical ideas given its high accessibility. Moreover, the way in which sexes are portrayed in advertising affects people's perceptions of gender roles in real life. Using content analysis, we collected empirical data on gender stereotyping of women depicted in 946 printed advertisements from two European countries widely differing in their level of masculinity, the UK and the Netherlands. The results indicate that a country's masculinity index is hardly related to the use of gender stereotyping in printed advertising, potentially implying that other factors underlie the use of gender stereotyping.

Key words: Gender stereotyping, UK and the Netherlands, advertising, content analysis, masculinity index

IS GENDER STEREOTYPING IN ADVERTISING MORE PREVALENT IN MASCULINE COUNTRIES? A CROSS-NATIONAL ANALYSIS

According to Hofstede (1980), women are better educated, hold more qualified jobs, earn more money, and are better represented in parliament in feminine countries compared to masculine countries. For example, in the Netherlands, a predominantly feminine country (masculinity index 14/100), women are significantly better represented in European Parliament (32%) compared to the United Kingdom (18%), a typically masculine country (masculinity index 66/100) (European Commission, 1997).

While this observation on gender differences is in line with Hofstede's (1980) theory on masculinity, masculinity indices are also assumed to be portrayed in other cultural symbols such as advertising (Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund, 1995). Strong arguments have been made suggesting that advertising both reflects and influences cultural values (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). To a large extent, such cultural values are apparent from the traditional notions of male/female roles (Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund, 1995). Huang (1995) argued that it is natural to expect that the gender roles portrayed in a country's advertising reflect the gender-role orientation of that particular country. Similarly, Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund (1995) indicated that gender-role orientation in a culture's advertising can be categorized under Hofstede's national cultural dimension of masculinity.

Investigating the link between gender stereotyping in advertising and masculinity is a promising research avenue, as it could assist advertisers in gaining insight into salient values that might appeal to target audiences (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). While some attempts have already been made to test whether the masculinity dimension is reflected in gender roles portrayed in advertising, most studies on the subject took a single-country approach, impeding their potential of testing whether countries differing with respect to masculinity also differ in terms of the level of gender stereotyping used in advertising. First, despite some valuable exceptions (e.g., Gilly, 1988), most of the research on gender stereotyping has been conducted within one country (e.g., Ford et al., 1998; Kolbe and Albanese, 1996; Lysonski, 1985), limiting its appropriateness for our research purpose (Huang, 1995). In order to assess whether a country's level of masculinity is reflected in its degree of gender stereotyping in advertising, at least two countries differing in masculinity scores are required. While gender stereotyping is considered to be a universal phenomenon, its intensity is expected to vary in degree from country to country (Huang, 1995). Previous evidence indicates that the level of stereotyping differs between countries despite the many cross-cultural similarities in the traits ascribed to

men and women (Browne, 1998). Second, the notion of gender stereotyping in advertising has been given ample empirical support in the US to the neglect of other countries (e.g., Gilly, 1988; Kolbe and Albanese, 1996). While these studies have generated valuable insights, the scarcity of advertising research in a European context is regrettable (Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund, 1995), particularly as there are no particular reasons to assume that US results are generalizable, given its diverging scores on Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions compared to several European countries.

In response to these concerns, the objective of this study is to collect empirical data on gender stereotyping of women in printed advertisements from two European countries widely differing in their level of masculinity, the UK and the Netherlands, thereby aiming to test whether gender stereotyping is more prevalent in masculine countries as opposed to feminine countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizations advertising their products or services in different countries should be aware of a country's existing norms concerning role portrayals and the way these organizations affect these norms (Gilly, 1988). As estimations indicate that people typically spend a daily average of 25 minutes looking at magazines equaling exposure to approximately 70 advertisements, advertising images are considered to influence a society's perception of appropriate sex roles (Barthel, 1992; Gilly, 1988; Huang, 1995). It is generally recognized that advertising impacts gender socialization and people's views of themselves and other people (Browne, 1998). Socialization is the process by which cultural norms are transferred from one generation to the next. It starts in the family, proceeds in peer groups and in schools, but it is also constantly nourished through the media (Huang, 1995). In this study, we investigate whether gender stereotyping in advertising differs across countries characterized by a different level of masculinity. Both the concepts of masculinity and gender stereotyping are discussed below.

Hofstede's masculinity dimension

Numerous researchers use Hofstede's (1980) cultural model as a framework for deducting and testing cross-cultural differences (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). His ideas are based on an extensive research investigating on which dimensions national cultures exhibit

significant differences. He defined a dimension as “an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures” (p. 14). Hofstede’s (1991) more recent study yielded a structure consisting of five dimensions on which societies differ: power distance (the extent to which people accept an unequal distribution of power), uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertain, risky situations), individualism/collectivism (the extent to which people learn to act as individuals rather than as members of cohesive groups), short-term/long-term orientation (the extent to which people are fostering virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift), and masculinity/femininity (the extent to which social gender roles are clearly distinct). Cultures scoring towards the masculine end of Hofstede’s (1980) continuum tend to have distinct expectations of male and female roles in society, whereas feminine cultures have a greater ambiguity in what is expected of each gender. Hence, in masculine societies social gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, earning money, showing off possessions, and caring little for others. Women on the other hand are supposed to be more modest, tender, nurturing, and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede, 1980; Usunier, 1993).

Gender stereotyping

Perkins (1997) considered a stereotype as a group concept that reflects inferior judgment and gives rise to a simple structure, implying a high probability that stereotypes are predominantly evaluative. Bootzin, Bower, and Crocker (1991) defined stereotypes as complex mental representations of different types of people, containing all the information that we know or believe to be generally true of them. They argued that a stereotype may be either an accurate or an inaccurate generalization about what members of a category are like. Barker (1999) provided us with yet another definition of a stereotype. He argued that a stereotype involves the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits and stressed that stereotyping reduces, naturalizes, and fixes differences. So it can be summarized that stereotyping involves the assignment of a (usually negative) label to certain groups of people based on a certain belief about how these people tend to behave. More specifically, gender stereotyping is concerned with the beliefs about why men and women differ.

Since the late 1960s, a major debate started on the portrayal of women in advertising. Women were claimed to be portrayed in a sexist manner, inferior relative to their capabilities and skills (Lysonski, 1985). The debate focused on whether advertising correctly reflects

women's roles in society or whether it emphasizes stereotypical roles that no longer existed (DeYoung and Crane, 1992). In the 1970s, in response to growing feminists' criticisms related to this topic, researchers in a number of fields, such as social psychology, marketing, law, and communication, started examining the issue mainly from a US advertising context. Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) undertook one of the first studies of women's role portrayals in advertising. Many studies followed of which the overall conclusion was that women were indeed portrayed differently than men (e.g., Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Goffman, 1979; Venkatesan and Losco, 1975). Similar conclusions were drawn in the 1980s (e.g., Courtney and Whipple, 1983; Gilly, 1988; Lysonski, 1985). More recent studies found that gender stereotyping in advertising persists, suggesting that the portrayal of women in advertisements has not changed considerably over the years (e.g., Huang, 1995; Klassen, Jasper, and Schwartz, 1993; Sengupta, 1995).

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Previous studies concluded that men were generally more likely than women to be shown in working roles, whereas a large majority of female characters was depicted in non-working roles. Moreover, the *type* of working role and non-working role has been found to differ between sexes (e.g., Sengupta, 1995; Wiles and Tjernlund, 1991; Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund, 1995). Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) distinguished between the following five types of working roles: high-level business, entertainer or professional sportsperson, mid-level business, white-collar worker, and blue-collar worker. They classified non-working roles into family, recreational, and decorative roles. Finally, female characters in advertising have often been found to be younger than male characters (e.g., Huang, 1995).

Our main objective is to assess whether a country's masculinity score is related to the *extent* to which gender portrayal occurs. Based upon Hofstede's (1980) masculinity scores, one would expect more gender stereotyping in the UK (masculinity high) compared to the Netherlands (masculinity low). Preliminary evidence for this is provided by studies conducted by Cheng (1997), Huang (1995), and Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund (1995). A country with a high masculinity index score will most probably have clearly differential sex roles, whereas in a country with a low masculinity index score, sex roles will be more ambiguous, fluid, or subject to rapid changes. Hofstede (1980) indicated that in more masculine societies, fewer men are positive toward the idea of seeing females in leadership positions. Also Huang (1995)

noted that success, competitiveness, and independence are more heavily emphasized in a masculine country.

Consequently, one can expect women in a more masculine country to be portrayed accordingly in advertising. For example, Huang (1995, p. 86) reasoned that “we would expect to find that in more masculine societies, ... working women would be less frequently portrayed in advertising than in a more feminine society.” A comparable example is provided by Wiles and Tjernlund (1991) who found that in US magazines (highly masculine) women were more likely to be placed in a decorative role than in Swedish magazines (highly feminine). Also Lysonski (1985) and Sengupta (1995) stated that advertisements in masculine countries present women as less equal to men and more as sex objects than in feminine countries. Therefore, we posit the hypotheses:

H₁ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters less in a working role

H₂ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters less in high- and mid-level business working roles

H₃ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters more in a decorative non-working role

H₄ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters as being younger

H₅ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters less as being equal to men

H₆ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters more as sex objects

H₇ Compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters more in a seductive type of dress

METHODOLOGY

As the objective of the study is to relate gender stereotyping in advertising to a country's level of masculinity, two countries were selected that diverged widely in terms of their masculinity score, using the following procedure. Hofstede's (1991) study included 58 countries, of which 18 European. We divided these 18 countries in three clusters of 6 countries, based on their masculinity score. We aimed at including one country from the masculine cluster and one country from the feminine cluster. While more extreme differences in masculinity could be found, we opted for the Netherlands (masculinity score: 14) and the United Kingdom (masculinity score: 66) given practical considerations such as the availability of magazines.

We used interpretative content analysis to assess gender stereotyping in printed advertisements. Although content analysis is susceptible to bias due to methods of data collection, interpretation, or analysis, it has strong merits and can make a meaningful contribution to theory development and testing (Browne, 1998; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991). Moreover, we made persistent attempts to eliminate potential biases.

We used six different British and six comparable Dutch high circulation magazines covering the October 1999 and December 1999 issues of these magazines. The sample was a convenience sample ensuring the broadest coverage of advertisements not intended to generalize the advertisements to all British and Dutch magazines. The incorporated magazines were selected based upon their being either primarily male, primarily female, or gender independent in their readership or orientation. Moreover, we selected magazines that were maximally comparable in terms of reading audience and content provided across both countries, preferably resulting in the same magazine that was investigated in both countries. By doing so, we try to control for the influence of magazine related factors on gender stereotyping in advertising. The male oriented UK magazines included *Esquire* (circulation 61.271) and *GQ* (circulation 140.112), while the Dutch magazines in this category included *Esquire* (circulation 20.540) and *Man* (circulation xx). The female oriented magazines included *Cosmopolitan* (circulation UK: 460.086, the Netherlands: 108.264) and *Marie Claire* (circulation UK: 400.000, the Netherlands: 103.646) in both country samples. The gender independent magazines included in the UK were *Reader's Digest* (circulation 1.100.000) and *The Economist* (circulation: 125.000), while the Dutch gender independent magazines included *Reader's Digest* (circulation 300.000) and *Elsevier* (circulation 138.390).

The selection of advertisements was based upon two primary criteria. First, only ads that were of sufficient size were chosen. Selection of ads was restricted to those of half a page in size or larger. Second, advertisements had to contain at least one adult human depiction that was clearly discernible. A total of 946 advertisements that met these criteria were used in the study, including 600 UK (including 494 female and 400 male characters) and 346 Dutch (including 238 female and 237 male characters) advertisements. In case the same advertisements appeared more than once across magazine titles, we included all of them in the total sample. This was deemed appropriate as it reflects the ‘true’ exposure of magazine readers to gender stereotyping in both countries. In case only unique advertisements were to be included in the sample, this would not give a realistic idea of the extent to which gender stereotyping is actually reflected in advertising.

Coding of characters was done as follows. Only the central character(s) in an advertisement was/were considered in collecting information about role portrayals. A character was classified as a central character when the focus of the advertisement was on the body and/or activities of that person. No more than two central characters were coded for any advertisement (Mazella et al., 1992). Based upon the classification schemes of Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), Lysonski (1985), Sengupata (1995), and Wiles, Wiles, and Tjernlund (1995), we examined five different variables associated with differences in gender depictions:

- (1) Gender of the central character(s), classified as (a) male or (b) female
- (2) Age of the central character(s), classified as (a) between 18-35 years old, (b) between 36-50 years old, or (c) over 50 years old
- (3) Type of role in which the central character(s) was/(were) depicted, classified as (a) working or (b) non-working. Working roles refer to characters being depicted in occupational settings, while non-working roles relate to home or outdoors settings.
- (4) Type of working role of the central character(s), classified as (a) high-level business executive, (b) entertainer or professional sportsperson, (c) mid-level business (sales/semi-professional), (d) white collar worker (non-professional), or (e) blue collar worker
- (5) Type of non-working role of the central character(s), classified as (a) family, (b) recreational, or (c) decorative. Family roles depicted models with children or other family members in a family environment. Recreational roles were characterized by models in a non-working leisure activity such as watching

television or jogging. Decorative roles were of a passive and non-functional nature, primarily meant to enrich the product as a sexual or attractive stimulus.

(6) Stereotype of female central character(s), classified as (a) shown as sex object, (b) shown as equal to men, or (c) other

(7) Type of dress worn by female central character(s), classified as (a) demure or (b) seductive

Two graduate Dutch students, one male and one female, both fluent in English, coded each advertisement by indicating with a 1 or 0 whether or not each trait was represented in the central character. Kassarian (1977) and Kolbe and Burnett (1991) provided methodological guidelines for content analysis. The two coders were carefully trained and instructed by the researchers practicing on a set of Belgian advertisements that were not included in the final sample. After reaching consensus on the coding procedures, the coders worked independently of each other. The inter-coder reliability values all exceeded 89%, which was deemed to be appropriate. The extensive training, the pilot study of Belgian advertisements, and the close supervision by the researchers might have attributed to the high inter-coder agreements. When a disagreement did arise, a third judge was consulted and discussions were held until a consensus was reached.

RESULTS

First, we examined whether females are less frequently portrayed in a working role than males in UK advertisements as opposed to Dutch advertisements (H_1). Table 1 shows the comparative role portrayals between women in the UK and the Netherlands. In UK advertisements, 3.2% of all female central characters were depicted in a working role compared to 5.9% in Dutch advertisements. This difference was found to be marginally significant ($Z = 1.73$). This implies that hypothesis 1 is supported.

Second, we assessed whether female characters are less frequently portrayed in high- and mid-level business working roles in UK than in Dutch advertisements (H_2). We compared the percentage of high- and mid-level working roles within all working roles between UK and Dutch females. However, no significant differences could be detected ($Z = 0.39$), implying no support for hypothesis 2.

Third, we tested whether female characters are more frequently portrayed in a decorative non-working role in UK than in Dutch advertisements (H_3). We compared the percentage of decorative non-working roles within all non-working roles between UK and

Dutch females. However, no significant differences could be detected ($Z = 0.70$), so no support for hypothesis 3 was found.

Next, we investigated whether female characters are relatively younger in UK than in Dutch advertisements (H_4). We compared the percentage of female characters in the age range of 18 to 35 years between UK and Dutch advertisements. A significant difference could be detected ($Z = 1.72$), which was however in the opposite direction. So, counter-evidence was found for hypothesis 4.

Finally, we found no support for hypothesis 5 stating that women were portrayed more equal to men in feminine as opposed to masculine countries. While 12.6% of female characters in Dutch advertisements were shown as being equal to men, Table 1 indicates that this percentage was 15.4% in the UK sample ($Z = 1.00$). On the contrary, we found marginal support for hypothesis 6 indicating that women are more shown as sex objects in masculine countries than in feminine countries. Table 1 shows that, in UK advertisements, 25.1% of the female characters was depicted as a sex object compared to 18.9% in the Dutch sample ($Z = 1.87$). The final hypothesis dealt with investigating whether the type of dress worn by the female central character was more seductive in a masculine country. We found no support for this ($Z = 1.39$). As indicated in Table 1, 25.7% of women were depicted in a seductive dress in UK advertisements compared to 21.0% in Dutch advertisements, resulting in a non-significant difference.

Insert Table 1 About Here

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The main objective of our study was to examine whether the extent of gender stereotyping is related to a country's masculinity score. No convincing support was found. Only hypotheses 1 and 6 were confirmed, positing that advertisements in the United Kingdom portrayed female characters less in a working role and more as sex objects than advertisements in the Netherlands. All other hypotheses comparing female characters in feminine and masculine countries could not be supported. We even found counter-evidence for the hypothesis that female characters in the United Kingdom would be depicted younger than female characters in the Netherlands. As a result, it can be argued that the masculinity

index is not able to elucidate all differences in gender role portrayals. A possible explanation is that other forces in each country such as self-regulation of advertising also influence gender stereotyping in advertising. Another potential reason underlying our results is the fact that we did not take into account recent changes in actual roles occupied by men and women. Hofstede's (1991) masculinity scores might not correctly reflect the roles men and women hold in the 21st century. We could argue that the portrayal of women is increasingly converging across western European societies, resulting in fewer differences in gender stereotyping between countries that differ on their masculinity scores. Nevertheless, Gilly (1988) weakens this argument by stating that there appears to be a time lag between changing sex roles in a society and the portrayal of sex roles in advertising.

The finding that masculinity scores seem not directly related to the level of gender stereotyping in advertising has important consequences for advertisers. If variation in advertising content would be linked to a culture's masculinity index, an advertiser's task crossing national borders would be simplified and more predictable as to its outcomes (Albers-Miller and Gelb, 1996). Given the weak or even non-existing differences between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, companies advertising in both countries will experience difficulties in deciding how to prepare visual images that are congruent to gender role portrayal deemed to be appropriate in both countries.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A major limitation concerns the use of only two countries for which gender stereotyping is assessed. More convincing support for our hypotheses could be acquired by incorporating a larger variety of countries differing in terms of masculinity scores. Future researchers ought to examine a sufficiently large country sample to permit stronger cross-cultural comparisons. Another shortcoming is the time gap between the moment Hofstede (1991) collected data on masculinity scores and the moment we conducted our content analysis (1999). Changes in actual roles occupied by men and women between 1991 and 1999 could affect the interpretation of our results. A third problem could be related to biases resulting from the content analysis itself. Although we undertook all necessary steps in order to avoid potential biases, there still remains a risk of subjective interpretation and incorrect classification. Fourth, the fact that the sample of magazines investigated slightly differed between countries could have affected our results concerning country comparisons. For the extent of gender stereotyping in a magazine probably partly depends upon the specific target

audience and objectives of this magazine. In addition, our study is limited to print advertisements only. As differences in gender stereotyping could exist across different types of media, we suggest future researchers to include other media. Especially electronic media could provide an interesting future research avenue as advertisers might approach such media in a different way compared to traditional media given the specific profile of electronic media users. Finally, this study did not collect information on consumer responses towards the existence of gender stereotypes in advertising. This could however be useful as it provides more clear directions for advertisers in terms of the way they should depict men and women. If stereotypes are present in advertising, are they deemed offensive? Do or would consumers boycott products advertised in such ways or the companies that sponsor such advertising? Answers to these questions need to be provided in future studies.

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TABLE 1:**Differences between females in UK and Dutch advertisements**

Females portrayed in ...	UK ads	Dutch ads	Z	Support
	% (N)			
H ₁ : ... working role	3.2% (494)	5.9% (238)	1.73*	Yes
H ₂ : ... high- and mid level business working role	50.0% (16)	42.8% (14)	0.39	No
H ₃ : ... decorative non-working role	70.5% (478)	67.9% (224)	0.70	No
H ₄ : ... the age between 18 to 35 years old	93.5% (494)	96.6% (238)	1.72*	No
H ₅ : ... an equal role to males	15.4% (494)	12.6% (238)	1.00	No
H ₆ : ... a role of sex object	25.1% (494)	18.9% (238)	1.87*	Yes
H ₇ : ... a seductive type of dress	25.7% (494)	21.0% (238)	1.39	No

(*) $p < 0.05$ (one-tailed significance test)