CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ROLES PORTRAYED BY WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS IN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

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The (in most cases unnamed) models that featured in the advertisements and commercials studied.
SYNOPSIS

Women have been portrayed in advertising in stereotypical roles for years. Typical stereotypes include the nurturing mother or the alluring seductress. Since the social climate and the roles of females have evolved through the years, the appropriate portrayal of women in today's media has become debatable. Findings from previous advertising research studies indicate that women are generally not depicted in powerful roles. This may limit the perceptions of women as it does not reflect their abilities and positions of power that they hold in real life.

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements and television commercials in South Africa. Several secondary research objectives were set including inter alia the incidence of female models in advertisements and commercials, the ethnic representation of women in advertisements and commercials, and the types of products and services advertised using female models.

Data were collected from full-page and double-page advertisements appearing in nine consumer magazines as well as commercials broadcasted during prime time on the four free-to-air television channels. The research method used was content analysis, which focused on the visual elements in advertisements and commercials - particularly the female model. The sample included 203 magazine advertisements and 245 television commercials. The results indicated that 55 per cent of magazine advertisements and 40 per cent of television commercials featured women.

The findings also indicated various roles portrayed by women. The most prevalent role portrayal in magazine advertisements was that of a physically decorative woman (27%), typified as a woman that symbolises the physical ideal. In television commercials, women were most often depicted as product users, with 25 per cent of the portrayals showing a woman actually using or preparing to use the advertised product. The less prevalent portrayals included career woman, homemaker, mother, mannequin, romantic, sex object, social being, background elements as well as various “other” categories.
From the “other” portrayals, the study has also identified new roles that had not been specifically identified in previous studies. The new roles identified in magazines were leisure woman and sportswoman, and in television commercials, customer and spokesperson.

The results further revealed that women are used as visual attention-attracting focus points in advertisements across a range of different product or service categories. The product category that most often featured women in both media was personal care products (41% for magazine and 26% for television advertisements).

The implications of the study are that South African advertisers need to consider the suitability of the models that are used to attract attention to their advertisements, as well as the fit between the role portrayal and the brand image. From a practical perspective, the study provides insight to advertisers regarding the relevance of female portrayals in advertising. One of the recommendations is that future research should be conducted to determine women’s opinions on female portrayals in advertisements.

The study contributes to the available literature on this topic in several ways. Firstly, current female roles in South African magazine and television advertising have been identified. Moreover, a number of new role portrayals were also identified and described. The information gained in the study could be utilised by other researchers as a basis for future studies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY ........................................................................ 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................ 1

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT, OBJECTIVES AND DELIMITATIONS ........................................ 3

   1.2.1 Problem statement ............................................................................................. 3

   1.2.2 Objectives of the study ....................................................................................... 4

   1.2.3 Delimitations ...................................................................................................... 5

1.3 DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS .................................................................................... 5

1.4 METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................................... 8

   1.4.1 Literature review ................................................................................................ 8

      1.4.1.1 An overview of the promotional mix ............................................................ 8

      1.4.1.2 Promotion as a communication tool ............................................................ 9

      1.4.1.3 Promotion and advertising ........................................................................ 9

      1.4.1.4 Creating advertisements ........................................................................... 10

      1.4.1.5 Consumer behaviour ................................................................................. 12

      1.4.1.6 The consumer decision-making process ................................................... 12

      1.4.1.7 Influencing factors on the consumer decision-making process ................. 13

      1.4.1.8 Female role portrayals in magazine advertisements .................................. 14

      1.4.1.9 Female role portrayals in television commercials ..................................... 19

      1.4.1.10 Summary of female role portrayals in advertisements and commercials .. 22

   1.4.2 Empirical research: design and method ........................................................... 23

      1.4.2.1 Description of research design ..................................................................... 23

      1.4.2.2 Sampling ................................................................................................... 25

      1.4.2.3 Data collection .......................................................................................... 27

      1.4.2.4 Data analysis ............................................................................................ 28

      1.4.2.5 Recording, storing and accuracy of data................................................... 28

      1.4.2.6 Preparation of data for analysis: coding and analysis ............................... 29

      1.4.2.7 Assessing and demonstrating the quality and rigour of the content analysis ..................................................................................................... 29

1.5 ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY .............................................................................. 30
CHAPTER 2: THE PROMOTIONAL MIX

2.1 INTRODUCTION

2.2 THE MARKETING MIX

2.2.1 Elements of the marketing mix

2.2.1.1 Product

2.2.1.2 Price

2.2.1.3 Place (distribution)

2.2.1.4 Promotion

2.2.1.5 The extended marketing mix for services

2.3 PROMOTIONAL STRATEGY

2.3.1 Perspectives on promotion

2.3.2 The communication model

2.3.2.1 The sender

2.3.2.2 Encoding

2.3.2.3 The message

2.3.2.4 The channel or medium

2.3.2.5 The receiver

2.3.2.6 Noise

2.3.2.7 Feedback (response)

2.3.3 The elements of the promotional mix

2.3.3.1 Public relations/publicity

2.3.3.2 Sales promotion

2.3.3.3 Personal selling

2.3.3.4 Direct marketing

2.3.3.5 Events and sponsorship marketing

2.3.3.6 Internet/interactive media

2.3.3.7 Advertising

2.4 ADVERTISING

2.4.1 Perspectives on advertising

2.4.1.1 Advertising defined

2.4.1.2 The objectives and functions of advertising

2.4.1.3 The roles of advertising

2.4.1.4 Classifications of advertising
2.4.2 Advertising media ................................................................. 65
  2.4.2.1 Print media ........................................................................... 68
  2.4.2.2 Broadcast media ................................................................. 70
  2.4.2.3 Out-of-home media ......................................................... 73
  2.4.2.4 Interactive media .............................................................. 74
2.5 THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR ................................................... 76
  2.5.1 Definition and importance of consumer behaviour ................... 76
  2.5.2 A model of consumer behaviour ........................................... 77
  2.5.3 The consumer’s decision-making process ................................ 78
  2.5.4 Internal determinants of consumer behaviour ....................... 84
  2.5.5 External determinants of consumer behaviour ....................... 88
2.6 SUMMARY ............................................................................... 91

CHAPTER 3: CREATIVE MESSAGE STRATEGY ................................................................. 93

3.1 INTRODUCTION ............................................................................. 93
3.2 MESSAGE STRATEGY ................................................................. 94
  3.2.1 The creative brief ................................................................. 94
  3.2.2 Message execution ............................................................... 96
    3.2.2.1 Executional styles ......................................................... 96
    3.2.2.2 Advertising appeals ................................................... 101
3.3 CREATING ADVERTISEMENTS .................................................... 104
  3.3.1 Message design ................................................................. 104
  3.3.2 Printed advertisements ....................................................... 106
    3.3.2.1 Display copy ............................................................. 108
    3.3.2.2 Body copy ............................................................... 109
    3.3.2.3 Visuals ................................................................. 110
  3.3.3 Broadcast advertisements (television) ..................................... 115
    3.3.3.1 Copy for television commercials .............................. 116
    3.3.3.2 Video ................................................................. 117
    3.3.3.3 Audio ................................................................. 118
    3.3.3.4 Other elements ..................................................... 118
3.4 MODELS IN ADVERTISING ............................................................ 119
  3.4.1 Single models ................................................................. 121
CHAPTER 4: FEMALE ROLE PORTRAYALS IN ADVERTISING .................................125

4.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................125

4.2 OVERVIEW OF ROLE PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING ................126

4.2.1 The roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements .......................128
  4.2.1.1 Sex object..................................................................................................129
  4.2.1.2 Mother/nurturer .......................................................................................131
  4.2.1.3 Physically attractive/decorative ...............................................................132
  4.2.1.4 Working/career woman ...........................................................................132
  4.2.1.5 Housewife ...............................................................................................135
  4.2.1.6 Dependant ..............................................................................................135
  4.2.1.7 Mannequin ..............................................................................................136
  4.2.1.8 Product user ...........................................................................................138
  4.2.1.9 Social being ............................................................................................138
  4.2.1.10 Romantic role .........................................................................................139
  4.2.1.11 Engagement in non-traditional activities .................................................140

4.2.2 Roles portrayed by women in television commercials ....................................141
  4.2.2.1 Work-related ...........................................................................................142
  4.2.2.2 Homemaker/housewife ...........................................................................143
  4.2.2.3 Wife/mother ............................................................................................144
  4.2.2.4 Decorative ...............................................................................................145
  4.2.2.5 Product user ...........................................................................................145
  4.2.2.6 Sex object ...............................................................................................145
  4.2.2.7 Social being ............................................................................................146

4.2.3 A summary of the roles portrayed by women in advertisements and commercials ............................................................................................................147
  4.2.3.1 Universal female role portrayals in advertisements and commercials ....148
  4.2.3.2 Unique female role portrayals in advertisements and commercials ......149
  4.2.3.3 Additional elements ................................................................................150

4.3 SUMMARY ...........................................................................................................153
## CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH METHOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 THE NATURE AND ROLE OF MARKETING RESEARCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 ADVERTISING RESEARCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1.1 Developmental research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1.2 Copy research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1.3 Post-testing of advertisements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 CONTENT ANALYSIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 Content analysis as a research method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 Requirements for content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3 Applications of content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.4 The content analysis research process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 STEP 1: THEORY AND CONCEPTUALISATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 STEP 2: UNITS OF ANALYSIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.1 Sampling units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.2 Data collection units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6.3 Analysis units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 STEP 3: SAMPLING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.1 Sample population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.2 Sample frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.3 Sampling methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.3.1 Sampling for magazine advertisements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7.3.2 Sampling for television commercials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8 STEP 4: CODING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8.1 Codebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8.1.1 Criteria for the establishment of role categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8.2 Coding forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9 STEP 5: PILOT STUDY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9.1 Coder training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.10 STEP 6: FINAL CODING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11 STEP 7: DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11.1 Reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11.2 Validity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION ..........................................................191

6.1 INTRODUCTION ..............................................................................................191

6.2 REALISATION OF THE PILOT STUDY ............................................................191

6.2.1 Sampling .....................................................................................................192

6.2.2 Pilot study data collection ..........................................................................193

6.2.2.1 Magazine advertisements .................................................................193

6.2.2.2 Television commercials ....................................................................196

6.2.3 Pilot study reliability ..................................................................................200

6.2.3.1 Reliability of pilot study for magazine advertisements ....................201

6.2.3.2 Reliability of pilot study for television commercials .........................203

6.3 REALISATION OF THE FINAL STUDY ..........................................................207

6.3.1 Final sample ...............................................................................................207

6.3.1.1 Sample for magazine advertisements ..............................................208

6.3.1.2 Sample for television commercials ...............................................208

6.3.2 Data collection ...........................................................................................209

6.3.2.1 Codebook ..........................................................................................209

6.3.2.2 Coding forms ......................................................................................210

6.3.3 Inter-coder reliability ................................................................................210

6.3.3.1 Reliability of the final study for magazine advertisements ..........211

6.3.3.2 Reliability of the final study for television commercials ...............213

6.3.4 Validity .......................................................................................................215

6.4 FINDINGS AND RELATED OBJECTIVES .....................................................216

6.4.1 Primary objective: the roles portrayed by women ................................216

6.4.1.1 The roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements ..........217

6.4.1.2 The roles portrayed by women in television commercials ..........219

6.4.2 Secondary objective 1 ..............................................................................221

6.4.2.1 Incidence of female models in magazine advertisements ..........222

6.4.2.2 Incidence of female models in television commercials ..........222

6.4.3 Secondary objective 2 ..............................................................................223
6.4.4 Secondary objective 3....................................................................................223
  6.4.4.1 The ethnic representation of women in magazine advertisements ........224
  6.4.4.2 The ethnic representation of women in television commercials .........225
6.4.5 Secondary objective 4....................................................................................226
  6.4.5.1 Advertising appeals in magazine advertisements .........................226
  6.4.5.2 Advertising appeals in television commercials .............................226
6.4.6 Secondary objective 5....................................................................................227
  6.4.6.1 Celebrities in magazine advertisements .........................................227
  6.4.6.2 Celebrities in television commercials ..............................................227
6.4.7 Secondary objective 6....................................................................................227
  6.4.7.1 Women in multiple roles in magazine advertisements ....................228
  6.4.7.2 Women in multiple roles in television commercials .......................228
6.4.8 Secondary objective 7....................................................................................229
  6.4.8.1 Product/service categories in magazine advertisements ...............229
  6.4.8.2 Product/service categories in television commercials ....................230
6.4.9 Secondary objective 8....................................................................................231
  6.4.9.1 Roles and product/service categories in magazine advertisements ..231
  6.4.9.2 Roles and product/service categories in television commercials ....235
6.4.10 Secondary objective 9...................................................................................240
  6.4.10.1 “Other” portrayals in magazine advertisements ............................241
  6.4.10.2 “Other” portrayals in television commercials ...............................246
  6.4.10.3 New roles in magazine advertisements and television commercials ..249
6.5 SUMMARY .............................................................................................................251

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..........253

7.1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................253

7.2 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS ......................................255
  7.2.1 Role portrayals..............................................................................................255
    7.2.1.1 Role portrayals in magazine advertisements ....................................255
    7.2.1.2 Role portrayals in television commercials .....................................261
  7.2.2 Number of female models in relation to overall advertisements or commercials ..........................................................265
  7.2.3 Nature of the visuals .....................................................................................266
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1  The marketing mix.................................................................34
Figure 2.2  The promotional mix (in the marketing mix)............................39
Figure 2.3  The marketing communication process....................................45
Figure 2.4  Advertising media.................................................................65
Figure 2.5  Advertising expenditure in 2009.................................................66
Figure 2.6  Viewership of television channels..............................................72
Figure 2.7  Model of consumer behaviour................................................77
Figure 4.1  Prevalence of the urban sophisticate image...............................129
Figure 4.2  Prevalence of the mannequin role portrayal in South African
magazine advertisements..........................................................137
Figure 5.1  The content analysis process................................................165
Figure 6.1  Percentages of female role portrayals in the magazine pilot study.....194
Figure 6.2  Percentages of product category advertisements featuring women
in the magazine pilot study......................................................196
Figure 6.3  Percentages of female role portrayals in the television commercial
pilot study....................................................................................197
Figure 6.4  Percentages of product category commercials featuring women in
the television pilot study..........................................................199
Figure 6.5  Percentages of the role categories in magazine advertisements
featuring women..........................................................................217
Figure 6.6  Percentages of the role categories in television commercials
featuring women..........................................................................219
Figure 6.7  Percentages of the ethnic representation of women in magazine
advertisements.............................................................................224
Figure 6.8  Percentages of the ethnic representation of women in television
 commercials..................................................................................225
Figure 6.9  Percentages of product/service categories in magazine
advertisements featuring women...................................................229
Figure 6.10 Percentages of product/service categories in television commercials
featuring women...........................................................................230
Figure 6.11  Percentages of “other” categories in magazine advertisements featuring women.................................................................242

Figure 6.12  Percentages of “other” portrayals in television commercials featuring women.................................................................247
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Female role portrayals in magazine advertising .......................... 14
Table 1.2 Female role portrayals in television commercials ..................... 20
Table 1.3 AMPS figures for magazines exceeding 500 000 in circulation
figures............................................................................................................. 25
Table 2.1 South African population’s access to media................................. 67
Table 2.2 Strengths and weaknesses of out-of-home media ....................... 74
Table 2.3 The role that advertising play in the consumer decision-making
process........................................................................................................... 90
Table 3.1 Summary of message executional styles by various authors .......... 96
Table 3.2 Rational and emotional advertising appeals................................. 101
Table 3.3 Copy formats for television commercials ..................................... 116
Table 4.1 Female role portrayals in magazine advertising .......................... 128
Table 4.2 Female role portrayals in television commercials ..................... 141
Table 4.3 Summary of roles portrayed by women in magazine and television
advertising........................................................................................................ 147
Table 4.4 The roles portrayed by women and the product categories
advertised.......................................................................................................... 151
Table 5.1 AMPS 2008B figures for magazines exceeding 500 000 in
readership ........................................................................................................ 173
Table 5.2 Annual television channel reach .................................................... 174
Table 6.1 Proportion of advertisements depicting women in the magazine
pilot study........................................................................................................... 193
Table 6.2 Proportion of commercials featuring women in the television
pilot study......................................................................................................... 196
Table 6.3  Frequencies of coder’s assessments of the ethnic variable: magazine pilot study ................................................................. 201
Table 6.4  Proportion of agreement levels for the ethnic variable: magazine pilot study ................................................................. 202
Table 6.5  Frequencies of coders’ assessments of the role variable: magazine pilot study ................................................................. 203
Table 6.6  Proportion of agreement levels for the role variable: magazine pilot study ................................................................. 203
Table 6.7  Frequencies of coders’ assessments of the ethnic variable: television pilot study ................................................................. 204
Table 6.8  Proportion of agreement levels for the ethnic variable: television pilot study ................................................................. 204
Table 6.9  Frequencies of coders’ assessments of the role variable: television pilot study ................................................................. 205
Table 6.10  Proportion of agreement levels for the role variable: television pilot study ................................................................. 205
Table 6.11  Inter-coder reliability: Krippendorff’s alpha and per cent agreement for the pilot study ...................................................... 206
Table 6.12  Frequencies of coders’ assessments for the ethnic variable: final magazine study .............................................................. 211
Table 6.13  Proportion of agreement levels for the ethnic variable: final magazine study .............................................................. 211
Table 6.14  Frequencies of coders’ assessments for the role variable: final magazine study .............................................................. 212
Table 6.15  Proportion of agreement levels for the role variable: final magazine study .............................................................. 212
Table 6.16  Frequencies of coders’ assessments of the ethnic variable:
final television study.................................................................213
Table 6.17  Proportion of agreement levels of the ethnic variable: final
television study........................................................................213
Table 6.18  Frequencies of coders’ assessments for the role variable: final
television study........................................................................214
Table 6.19  Proportion of agreement levels for the role variable: final
television study........................................................................214
Table 6.20  Inter-coder reliability: Krippendorff’s alpha, and per cent
agreement for variables in both media........................................215
Table 6.21  Frequencies and percentages of women depicted in multiple roles....228
Table 6.22  Frequencies and percentages of product/service category
advertisements for various roles in magazine advertisements........232
Table 6.23  Frequencies and percentages of product/service category
commercials for various roles in television commercials..............236
Table 6.24  Descriptive terms used to describe “other” portrayals in magazine
advertisements featuring women..................................................241
Table 6.25  “Other” categories in magazine advertisements featuring women....242
Table 6.26  Descriptive terms used to describe “other” portrayals in television
commercials featuring women.......................................................246
Table 6.27  “Other” categories in television commercials..........................247
Table 7.1  Roles portrayed by women in advertisements and commercials....255
Table 7.2  Proportion of product/service categories in magazine
advertisements and television commercials featuring women.........271
Table 7.3  Frequencies of “other” categories in magazine advertisements
featuring women............................................................................277
Table 7.4  Frequencies of “other” categories in television commercials featuring women