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AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF BEAUTY PRODUCT
ADVERTISEMENTS IN "COSMOPOLITAN" AND "ESQUIRE"

GENDER STEREOTYPING IN U.S. PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS

Sarah Höchst

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1 Introduction

“ADVERTISING PEOPLE WHO IGNORE RESEARCH ARE AS DANGEROUS AS GENERALS WHO IGNORE DECODES OF ENEMY SIGNALS.” – David Ogilvy

Advertising is everywhere in our contemporary society. We find it in our home, when we walk down the street or when we are at the bus station. Advertising is always with us, no matter where we are or who is with us (cf. Cook 1). Although we are aware of the constant bombarding by advertisers everywhere we go, we hardly recognize the influence that advertising has on us (cf. Mayne 56). Thereby, advertising has a great influence on us as individuals and on the society as a whole (cf. Cramer 1). With help of the media, we make sense of our cultural identities (cf. Cramer 221; Hodkinson 1) and “gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities” (Gauntlett 1). This is why I am going to study on the topic of gender stereotyping in U.S. American print advertisements in my master thesis.

Since the 1950s, there has been an increased focus on gender stereotypes in advertisements and on its social consequences (cf. Alpert 73; Cohen 24-25). By the 1960s and 1970s, many activist groups already began protesting against these stereotypes (cf. Courtney & Whipple 162). Today, many books and dissertations have been written about the portrayal of gender in advertising and on the influence it has on society (cf. Courtney & Whipple 31; Eisend & Plagemann & Sollwedel 256; Hepp 58). However, most studies of gender portrayal in the media focus on the construction of femininity (cf. Kervin 51), whereas I will pay attention to both, masculinity and femininity.

The central goal of this master thesis is to examine the development of presentations of gender stereotypes in print advertisements over a time period of 40 years via content analysis of a sample of magazine advertisements. In other words, the key questions are: How do U.S. print advertisements construct gender stereotypes, how did these stereotypes develop and do they have an influence on the consumer and the U.S. culture? Because content analyses have been proven in decades of research on gender stereotyping as it relates to the mass media (cf. Busby 127; Lin & Yeh 61) and because this is an appropriate method to not only focus on images, but also on verbal messages, I have chosen this kind of method

for my study.¹ Because magazines present an especially enduring, popular medium (cf. Gill 180), I am going to focus on gender stereotypes in print advertisements of magazines. Furthermore, I chose the magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *Esquire* due to the varying target audiences, meaning females and males respectively, and because they might be a potential indicator of U.S. magazine advertising in general (cf. Helgeson & Mager 239). To further limit the object of investigation and because these advertisements are useful for my research purposes, I decided to concentrate on beauty product advertisements.

To answer the key questions of this paper, I will first explain the phenomenon of sex, gender and stereotyping. Because I do not only want to have a theoretical background of these aspects, but also of advertising itself, I will further outline general information on advertisement, with focus on the history of advertisements and the characteristics of print advertisements. Then I will go on analyzing gender constructions in print advertisements of *Cosmopolitan* and *Esquire* magazines in a time period from the 1980s until the 2010s. For the analysis part of this thesis, I am going to use the major work *Gender Advertisements* by the “widely quoted authority on the subject of women and advertising” (cf. Tjernlund & Wiles & Wiles 38) Erving Goffman. In a last step, I will look at the development of the portrayal of each gender and then compare them with each other. Finally, I am going to give a conclusion of this master thesis with reference to the depicted key questions.

¹ However, even though this kind of method is a good tool for investigating on this topic, I have to keep in mind that a content analysis is also restrictive because it is mainly descriptive (cf. Cartwright & Srisupandit & Zhang 686).

2 Definitions of Sex, Gender and Stereotypes

In the Stone Age, the distribution of roles between males and females was clear: It was the job of men to hunt and provide the family with meat and the job of women to bear and raise the children (cf. Jaffé 108). This distribution of roles stayed nearly the same for a very long time up until the beginning of the 19th century (cf. Jaffé 109). But it was not until the early years of second-wave feminism that many feminist scholars and gender researchers made a distinction between the “notion of sex, defined as biological differences between male and female” (Carter 365), and the notion of gender, referring to social characteristics and behaviors attributed to each sex (cf. Goddard & Patterson 1; Zurstiege 38).² Nevertheless, the terms sex and gender “are [still] used interchangeably, [even though] they mean quite different things” (Jule 4). To make the complex ideas of sex and gender more clear and illustrate their interaction with the idea of stereotypes, I will clarify these terms in the chapters that follow. Because the notion of sex is a less complex concept, I will first explain this term. Next, I will discuss the idea of gender. Finally, I will explain these terms in combination with stereotyping to illustrate the relationship amongst them. The creation of such a theoretical basis is necessary to pursue the key questions of this paper.

2.1 Sex

Sex, in contrast to gender, is assumed to be a “biological fact” (Mayne 57; Stern 3) and “a matter of bodily attributes” (Talbot 7). In our society, people use genetic and biological qualities to characterize whether a human being is male or female. This classification is usually based on internal sex organs (prostate in males, ovaries and uterus in females) and external genitalia (penis and testes in males, clitoris and vagina in females) (cf. Ayaß 11; Wood 19).

Furthermore, it depends on the chromosomes whether you become male or female. Of the 23 chromosomes that a human being has, there is only one pair that determines his sex. The chromosome pair that influences sex usually has two chromosomes and one of them is always an X (cf. Wood 19). “The presence or absence of a Y chromosome determines whether a fetus will develop into what

² This differentiation was a theoretical breakthrough, “first articulated in detail by a British feminist in the early seventies” (Talbot 7). It is very important for feminists to dissolve “the power-based relationships attached to gender so that both women and men might live more freely.” (Jule 9)

we recognize as male or female. Thus, an XX creates female sex, whereas an XY creates male sex.” (Wood 19) In conclusion, sex is usually binary (cf. Archer & Lloyd 17). That means males and females are two types of human beings who are characterized within one species, “they can be defined only correlatively” (De Beauvoir 21). Certainly, there might be departures from the standard XX or XY structure, but as long as there is a single Y chromosome, a fetus will grow into what we call male (cf. Wood 19).

Another biological factor by which sex is determined is by the hormones. They already affect the human being before birth (cf. Wood 19). “In most cases, biology works smoothly so that the hormones direct development of female or male reproductive organs that are in line with external genitalia.” (Wood 19) In consequence, the gonads of a fetus with an XY chromosome structure would create the male hormone testosterone, with which the fetus develops male genitalia. “Without the production of this hormone, the foetus [sic] continues as normal; that is, it carries on developing as female.” (Talbot 7)³ Still, it might happen that a fetal development does not proceed typically, so that a child is born with ambiguous sex, which means that it has some biological features of each sex. Those people are called hermaphrodites (cf. Wood 20). As we grow up, the influence of hormones goes on. “They continue to affect our development by determining whether we will menstruate, how much body hair we will have and where it will grow, how muscular we will be . . . and so forth.” (Wood 20) And even though there has been much research on biological sexuality in the past, there are still divided opinions about aspects like whether high levels of testosterone lead to aggression and violence of men or whether biology has been the cause of hysterical behavior of women or if these processes are preferably tied to the environment (cf. Goddard & Patterson 1; Kendrick 26).

Nevertheless, the latest research has shown that “however strong the influence of biology may be, it seldom, if ever, determines behaviors” (Wood 21). Even though it might somehow influence how we act in the world, like Judith Butler already mentioned in *Bodies That Matter* (cf. 2; qtd. in Bleicher & Kannengießner & Loist 7),⁴ it does not determine the personality of a human being (cf.

³ “This assumption of a biological female-as-norm was an appealing idea for many feminists in the seventies and eighties, since it was a refreshing contrast to androcentric assumptions about the male-as-norm that permeated much scholarship” (Talbot 7).

⁴ Judith Butler has a critical attitude towards the distinction between sex and gender. According to Judith Butler, the biological sex is, like gender, a sociocultural construction (cf. “Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter” 23-24; “Hass spricht” 22).

July 4-5).⁵ Most researchers think that the environment has a stronger influence on the human development than biological qualities (cf. Wood 21). This differentiation between sex as something rather biological, determined physiologically by sex organs, chromosomes and hormones, and sex as something more environmental (cf. Boden & Fuller & Hartnett 12), leads us to a second concept called gender.

2.2 Gender

Because the concept of gender is an important part of the analysis of this paper and because everyone of us is a gendered being, it is necessary to know what this term means (cf. Wood 35). Gender, in contrast to sex, is socially constructed (cf. Cramer 219; Goddard & Patterson 1).⁶ It is something that we *do* rather than something that we *are* (cf. Hodgkinson 220). The notion of gender refers to how an individual acts in terms of feminine or masculine tendencies (cf. Wood 19). “In many respects, your gender represents an area of potential choice for you, because you can change it more easily than your sex.” (Wood 19) This is why gender is more complex than sex. While everyone’s sex is based on enduring physical factors, gender is neither stable nor universal. The human being acquires his or her gender through interaction in the social world, which is why it is variable (cf. Gardiner 35). Some researchers often refer to the concept of gender as something we can learn, for example, in our families or in various institutions like in school or in church (cf. Jaffé & Riedel 59). Simone de Beauvoir also claimed that we increasingly become feminine or masculine, so one is not born, but rather becomes a woman or a man (21). In addition, the mass media, like advertising, presents ideas on how to be properly masculine or feminine (cf. Kervin 51). We learn from these images because the mass media is part of our socialization processes (cf. Mayne 57). It tells us for example how to dress and how to express emotion and sexual desire (cf. Berkowitz & Duffy & Lafky & Steinmaus 379-380). “From infancy on we are encouraged to conform to the gender that society prescribes for us.” (Wood 22) Even before birth, many new parents buy blue clothes for a baby boy and pink clothes for a baby girl (cf. July

⁵ This idea of the biological influence on almost all aspects of a male or female person like behavior and temperament is called biological determinism. See Del I. Hawkins and Kenneth A. Coney, especially 424, for further description of biological determinism and its opposite, cultural determinism.

⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft might have been the first to realize the idea of gender because she claimed 1792 that most of the dissimilarities between the sexes are not natural, but socially constructed (qtd. in Wood 21).