

# Gender Differences in the Perception of Advertising in Postmodern Era

J. Zavodny Pospisil, L. S. Zavodna, K. Cerna

**Abstract**—The goal of this paper is to identify the main differences in the way men and women perceive TV ads. This paper is based on a research project conducted partly as a review of relevant papers, which deals with gender influence on the cognitive process and postmodern perception of advertising. In addition to that, qualitative research was conducted by means of interviews and structured questionnaires. Furthermore, data acquired from the research were used to evaluate our objectives and hypotheses. The goal of this paper is to compare women's and men's perception of advertisement. Although women are able to perceive more details than men, men are more susceptible to sexual appeals in advertising. Significant differences were also found in the perception of sexual appeals in the context of gender.

**Keywords**—Advertising, consumer, emotion, gender, psychology of advertising.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**G**ENDER disparity arises from social ideas determining characteristic representation of parameters, which predetermine the roles for individual genders. These ideas include hobbies, behavior, and typical personality features which are considered acceptable for the male or female genders. The above-mentioned differences are often understood as something already given, normal, or even natural or immutable. However, it is a social construction which is formed based on social experience.

Distinguishing genders as a social construct then factually affects, forms or modifies individual features and abilities of absolutely concrete men and women, as well as their standpoints, opinions and behavior toward the deeply rooted standards for the two genders – i.e. toward the “typically male” and “typically female”. Eventually, these features, standpoints, behavior, etc. may appear and be accepted as natural. However, what is perceived, understood and denoted as typically male and female features, abilities or skills (e.g. objectivity, intuition, empathy, technical rationality, subjectivity, as well as given conduct which is expected and required of members of each gender), is perceived and understood not based on objectivity, i.e. independent reality, but based on a certain social construction which is created,

interpreted and connected to certain meanings [1].

Gender marketing is based on different roles of women and men, and the way they express themselves in terms of consumer behavior. It deals with the differences of both genders in the area of values, needs and their satisfaction in connection to their presumed roles in both family and life. It is marketing focused on groups which are primarily defined by gender in terms of products and services being offered. The principle of gender marketing is most visibly applied in marketing communications, mainly in advertising, which arise from gender stereotypes. Gender marketing comes out of social reality: in its own way it is a “mirror of its time”, and affects it in return, too [2].

Despite the fact that today's postmodern society mainly takes pride in dynamics and individualism, it is necessary to point out the fact that individual, socially predetermined standards, also known as stereotypes, are not disappearing, however, they are gradually broadening [3]. For example neurologists from Pennsylvania University have confirmed that the brain of both genders develops differently. Whereas there is a dominant connection between both cerebral hemispheres in women, internal connection within each hemisphere is dominant in men. They have also claimed that the male brain is structured in order to facilitate the connection between perception and coordinated movement, whereas the female brain is structured in order to facilitate communication between analytical and intuitive way of processing information. These differences are specific; nevertheless, there are many other attributes which determine the disparity of perception within the structure of the human brain [4].

In advertising practice, stereotypical presentation of men and women in ads is substantiated, and that mainly in order to enable faster and easier orientation of the recipient in the message of the ad. In case of frequent stereotypical presentation, certain fixation of gender-related prejudices in a socially acceptable form may occur [5].

Diversity of individual perception is predetermined by individual preference of inner values, motives, needs, goals, etc. This diversity of perception is also affected by the social environment surrounding the given individual. We are speaking about selective perception, where each individual as the receptor of a commercial message can choose a diverse particular thing which has captured their attention. This selective perception then gives rise to selective change based on a diversity of associations and thought processes of an individual, created by them within the given commercial message [6].

Commercial appeals, which form the psychological side of

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the message, are a necessary part of commercial messages. We mainly distinguish information and emotional appeals. We can also encounter opinions claiming that commercial appeals are divided into information, emotional and moral ones [2]. The most frequently used emotional appeals are humor, fervor, erotica, or the motive of fear. Both erotic and humorous motives were examined within our research, which will be discussed in this article.

Erotic motives find their meaningful use mainly in ads advertising products such as cosmetics, lingerie, fragrances, or the services of plastic surgery, etc. Generally speaking, most ads present women as an erotic motive, which is meant to achieve a sexual undertone. Today we can often see the opposite example – the use of the male element to create a sexual undertone.

According to results from 2007, erotic ads give rise to greater interest in men than women. However, it is necessary to take into account a certain level of tolerance of these erotic and sexual motives in order to avoid the so-called vampire effect, which [2] explains by an indirect correlation between the amount of erotic motives and reduced remembering of the commercial message, which means that the more erotic motives are used, the more subdued the message or product may get. Another interesting thing within the research carried out by Kathleen D. Vohs and her colleagues from Minnesota University [7] is the fact that women are, in a certain way, “willing” to tolerate erotic or sexual motives in a commercial message at the “right”, in this case “more expensive”, price of the product, than in case of a very cheap product, whereas men did not show such dramatically distinctive responses as women did in terms of expenditures for the given product; generally speaking these motives were tolerated by men regardless of the price of the product.

Ads often work with emotions, too. Emotions are some of the necessary psychological elements which play an important role in the marketing environment, and not only there. According to Tellis the advantage of using emotions lies in the fact that they are able to lure the viewer into a story or action of the ad, and simultaneously distract their defensive alertness toward the manipulative essence of the ad. Tellis sees another advantage of using emotions in the fact that they require less attention from the viewer than complicated logical argumentations, which can be demonstrated on the use of a story or plot in an ad, or music, images, various characters or actors that can be remembered more easily by the viewer. In addition to that, inspiration, which is connected to emotions, is more interesting for the viewer than simple logical arguments [2].

Tellis sees disadvantages of using emotions in the fact that viewers can be so engulfed by the action itself or captivated by emotions that they miss the product being advertised, or the message of the ad will be significantly subdued. An incorrect amount of emotions can tarnish the product or brand being advertised, and simultaneously emotions such as sadness, fear or other negative emotions can be subconsciously refused by the viewer, which may lead to forgetting the ad. Also evoking strong emotions may provoke the impression that the

advertiser is abusing the situation [2].

## II. METHODOLOGY

The goal of this article is to compare the perception of a particular TV commercial by men and women aged 20-30. The given TV ad was chosen intentionally since it contains advertisement elements which determine the psychological aspects of advertisement. The commercial is sexually explicit (i.e. it has erotic motives) and contains elements of humor which are reflected by the actors in the given ad.

Based on an analysis and synthesis of available sources the following hypotheses have been made:

- 1H. Women have a much greater sense of detail than men.
- 2H. Women notice fewer sexual symbols than men.
- 3H. Women will consider the male element in an ad as sexually the most attractive, whereas men will be impressed by the female element.

In addition to that research questions were prepared in order to obtain necessary information to possibly distinguish advertisement perception based on gender. There were a total of 10 research questions, out of which 9 were open and 1 closed, which the respondents were supposed to answer. This questionnaire was carried out based on qualitative research conducted by means of a structured questionnaire with 9 open and 1 closed question, based on which the respondents gave their answers – see Table I.

TABLE I  
LIST OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Question	
1	Who was wearing a watch?
2	How many women appeared in the TV ad?
3	How many blondes and brunettes appeared in the TV ad?
4	Did a woman with a different hair color appear in the TV ad? (if so, what color was it?)
5	Did a woman with a different skin color appear in the TV ad?
6	How many women had their fingernails painted? (which, if any?)
7	How many erotic motives did you notice?
8	What do you consider the most attractive sexual element in the TV ad?
9	What is the full name of the product?
10	Choose the correct wording of the slogan:
	a) No calories. No fun.                      e) No sugar. No fun.
	b) Sugar free.                                      f) No Sugar. No worries.
	c) No calories. No sugar.                      g) No sugar. No calories.
	d) No worries. No calories.                      h) No sugar. No calories.

There were two criteria – the respondents' age and gender. They had to be between 20 and 30. At the end, the total number of respondents was 120; 60 of them men and 60 women. The research was started in multiple stages depending on the respondents' availability. They were in the form of a “focus group”, but in a written form.

For assessment it was necessary to determine a scoring system or categories for each research question. The respondents were given points for research questions 1-6 if they remembered and subsequently stated individual details they were asked about by means of research questions 1-6.

Table II shows individual answers within the scoring system. The system was set similarly for research questions 3-6.

TABLE II  
SCORING SYSTEM FOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS 1-6

Scoring System			
RQ1	0p	1p	2p
RQ2	0p	1p	-
RQ3	0p	1p	-
RQ4	0p	1p	-
RQ5	0p	1p	-
RQ6	0p	1p	-

TABLE III  
LIST OF ANSWERS FOR THE SCORING SYSTEM FOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS 1-2

	0p	1p	2p
RQ1	None of them, I don't know, no answer, I didn't notice, I didn't register that	Man /Woman	Both man and woman
RQ2	I don't know, I didn't notice, wrong number mentioned	Correct number 5	-

The scoring system for RQ7 was set based on erotic motives (sexual motives) registered by the respondents. In this case it was necessary to determine a scoring range for scorable and non-scorable answers made by the men and women. There was 1 point for each registered and then named erotic motive. No points were given for no answer, "no", or not registering any erotic motive.

For RQ8 it was necessary to distinguish what the respondents considered as the most attractive sexual element in the given TV ad. In order to process the acquired information it was necessary to categorize the respondents' answers. Three categories were distinguished into which individual answers made by the respondents were sorted out. The first category was named "the female element", which included all the respondents' answers connected to the image of a woman in the TV ad. The second category was "the male element", which included all the respondents' answers connected to a man in the TV ad. The last category was "other", which included all the other answers which were not connected to either the man or the women in the given TV ad.

For RQ9 and RQ10 we set the scoring system in such a way that the respondents could get a maximum of 2 points, provided they correctly answered both questions.

### III. RESEARCH

The selected TV ad was a Coca-Cola one advertising their Diet Coke. The ad is 60 seconds long. At the beginning there are 5 girls having a picnic in the park, drinking Diet Coke and talking. It is a beautiful sunny day, and a young man is mowing grass below a hill on which the girls are sitting. It occurs to one of them to roll a can of the beverage down the hill to him. He catches and lifts the can. On the girl's cue he pops it open. However, the content bursts out wetting his T-shirt. In order to avoid the girls' mocking him, he takes the T-shirt off in front of them, wrings it, and leaves the scene with the lawnmower in hand, smiling. The girls are having a good

laugh. This ad was shown to a selected group of respondents who were subsequently supposed to fill out the questionnaire. The respondents were briefed on the goal of this research, its course, and they were also informed that the questionnaire was absolutely anonymous, and in no way knowledge quiz. There was no time limit to fill out the questionnaire. Once filled out, the questionnaires were collected for a subsequent analysis and data processing.



Fig. 1 Selected picture from the TV ad [8]



Fig. 2 Selected picture from the TV ad [8]



Fig. 3 Selected picture from the TV ad [8]

Based on the acquired data and information from the questionnaires and their subsequent analysis we compared the results to our hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 was: "A woman has a far greater sense of detail than a man." This hypothesis was verified. Both conditions which were determined based on its

operationalization were fulfilled. In case of research questions 1-6 54% out of the total of correctly answered questions were answered by women. In case of research questions 9 and 10 60% of all the correct answers were made by women, and at the same time 50% of the women correctly answered both research questions 9 and 10.

We can state that women registered, observed, and subsequently remembered more details or detailed elements from the given TV ad than men did. The women were more successful in the perception of the content aspect of advertisement, i.e. the given detailed elements that we asked about, but also the overall story which the ad created.

Hypothesis 2 was: "Women will register fewer sexual symbols than men." This hypothesis was confirmed. Both conditions which were determined based on its operationalization were confirmed. In case of research question 7 58% of all the listed answers were answered by men, and at the same time 63% of the total number of male respondents answered more questions than was the average number of answers per woman.

We can say that men perceived more sexual symbols than women; or better – perceived, registered, and mentioned more erotic motives which were shown in the TV ad in comparison to women.

Hypothesis 3 was: "Women will consider the male element in the ad as sexually the most attractive, whereas men will be impressed by the female element in the ad". This hypothesis was confirmed. Both conditions which were determined based on its operationalization were confirmed. In case of research question 8 97% of the women found the male element in the ad the most sexually attractive, and simultaneously 73% of the men found the female element the most sexually attractive.

We can state that the women decisively considered the male element which created the story of the ad as the most sexually attractive. The men perceived the female element in the TV ad as the most sexually attractive. In case of the men the answer was not so decisive in terms of percentage as in case of the women, but still most respondents were impressed by the female element.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Besides partial goals we observed that the women really responded to the humor embedded in the particular TV ad. It was a form of humor which was preferred by the women. In this case the women sympathized, with a certain level of quizzicality, with the women against the man, and made it clear that they identified themselves with the story acted by the main characters. At the same time the TV ad was found to be an effective tool advertising the given product since it lived up to the expectations among the group of respondents, which was to correctly and effectively influence mainly the female part of the audience, which turned out well. Most of the female respondents responded more than favorably toward the message of the ad, which was achieved by the use of erotic appeal in the content part of the ad.

The women perceived the product a lot more distinctively in comparison to the men, both regarding the detail and

content sides of it. The men perceived certain details which were asked about by means of our research questions, but they did not register as many of them as the women did. We agree with those gender-focused publications which claim that men are not able to focus on more things at the same time. In this case it was a question of a few seconds during which images of individual details in the given TV ad blended, but the women were more precise in their perception of details.

In general, we can state that women's and men's perception of advertisement within this research was different. It differs in the perception of parameters such as details – which means detailed elements or compositions which form a part of the content part of advertisement. Subsequently, their perception of erotic appeals differs too, which includes erotic motives, and/or sexual symbols. At the same time, a different perception of the actors who played their parts in the story of the given ad was also manifested, which resulted in bringing emotions into the commercial message.

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