

Sui generis. Gender portrayals in the Italian television advertising

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Abstract

The article reports the results of a content analysis of 815 Italian commercials and a qualitative research on some case studies.

The study aims to determine the level of sex typing in the Italian advertising and try to find some new portrayals of men and women.

If the content analysis confirms the perpetuation of old stereotypes in the Italian commercials, the qualitative research reveals a timid transgression of traditional gender representations. Sometimes, women are depicted as professionals and ambitious workers, inserted in different workplaces and not confined at home, flanked by men and not only driven by them. Occasionally, men are depicted at home, in the role of father or as a sexual object.

However, the “new” portrayals do not imply a reduction of the differences between men and women; rather they articulate the gender diversity in a more subtle form. On the one hand, the Italian commercials reassure traditional identities, pushing them towards consumptions that destabilize the gender order. On the other hand, they promote a new awareness and attention to the gender complexity, anchoring it to traditional consumptions.

Even if the new portrayals are few and do not constitute a trend, they prove that the topic is more complex than it seems, and the issues are much more nuanced than in the past.

Keywords: Gender, Advertising, Representations, Role portrayals, Italian Television

Resumen. *Sui Generis. Representaciones de género en la publicidad televisiva Italiana*

El artículo presenta los resultados de un análisis de contenido de 815 anuncios publicitarios italianos y una investigación cualitativa sobre algunos estudios de casos.

El estudio tiene como objetivo determinar el nivel de asignación del sexo en la publicidad italiana y tratar de encontrar algunos cambios en las representaciones de género.

Mientras que el análisis de contenido confirma la perpetuación de los estereotipos de edad en los anuncios italianos, la investigación cualitativa revela una transgresión tímida de los roles de género tradicionales.

Palabras clave: Género, Publicidad, Representación, representaciones de roles, la televisión italiana

1. Introduction

Advertising is a persuasive, pervasive and repetitive form of communication. Indeed, it aims to create a positive attitude towards its object, be it a product, brand, a social cause, or political party. It fits every possible space, such as TV, radio, newspapers, cinemas, trains, buses, airports, shop windows, mailboxes, shopping bags, mobile phones and a growing number of unusual places (Panarese, 2010), to catch the attention of the target audience. It is also the only form of communication that repeats the same message dozens of times, to make it familiar and easy to remember.

Because of its features, advertising is a powerful form of communication that offers the most sustained and concentrated set of images in the media system. It has not only a great economic force, but also a profound influence on culture, values and quality of life (Bogart, 1967; Pollay, 1986; Zanacchi, 2004).

Probably more than other forms of communication, advertising develops attitudes, expectations, cultural orientations and behaviours, as well as the desires of purchase (Kahlenberg, Hein, 2010).

As an important socialization agent, it contributes to shape gender (Gauntlett, 2009) intended as a product of social interaction that creates normative expectations that influence how individuals perceive both themselves and others (Goffman, 1979).

As the cultivation theory has demonstrated, media portrayals influence audiences' perceptions of social reality, mostly for heavy viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, Shanahan, 2002). Media constructs frames, used by audience to make sense of the world (Goffman, 1974). In particular, advertisers use framing to capture shared rituals (Rook, 1985) and allow consumers to place themselves in a recognizable and attractive social position (Soloman, 1983, Zanacchi, 2004).

In providing what looks like a typical situation, advertisers take advantage of the audience's framing capacity, showing the position of men and women in relation to the product. Thus, they do not use any portrayals, but any simple and easily recognizable image (Davis, 2003). They show not the way men and women behave, but the ways in which audience think they should behave. These portrayals are so easily recognizable that they help to build the social representation of gender and allow creating a so-called *gendered native* (Bem, 1993).

According to Bandura (1994), «many of the shared misconceptions about [...] gender roles [...] are at least partly cultivated through symbolic modeling of stereotypes» (p. 76). The perpetuation of these stereotypes can have many effects (Bretl, Cantor, 1988). Through the mechanism of vicarious learning, viewers may adopt potentially stereotypical information about appropriate and socially desirable behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Moreover, media images may affect how individuals think about themselves (Groesz, Levine, Murnen, 2002; Tiggemann, McGill, 2004). Thus, by portraying stereotypical gender roles, advertising can stimulate and perpetuate discriminatory perceptions and behaviours (Gauntlett, 2009).

2. Literature Review

Over the past forty years, a significant body of research evidence about gender and advertising has been accumulated. The first studies date back to the early Seventies, at the time of the rise of the feminist movement and the growth of commercial television. They have been conducted mainly in the United States within various disciplines, such as sociology (Goffman, 1976), mass communications (Busby, 1975), feminist theory (Barthel, 1988), critical theory (Williamson, 1978), and marketing (Belkaoui, Belkaoui, 1976; Lundstrom, Siglimplaglia, 1977).

These studies showed many differences in the advertising portrayals of men and women, particularly on television (Chafetz, 1974; Furnham, Mak, 1999; McArthur, Resko, 1975). They revealed a small number, poor quality, and limited roles afforded female characters in the media, in comparison to male characters and real women (Barthel, 1988; Belkaoui, Belkaoui, 1976; Berganza, del Hoyo, 2006; Chafetz, 1974; Courtney, Whipple, 1974; Gilly, 1988; McArthur, Resko, 1975; Rodríguez Wangüemert, Matud Aznar, Espinosa, 2008; Schneider, Schneider, 1979). They also found that men were overrepresented numerically, were well-informed about the advertised product, were used as “expert” voice-over announcer, and shown in independent roles within a professional setting (Furnham, Bitar, 1993; Marececk, Piliavin, Fitzsimmons, Krogh, Leader, Trudell, 1978). Women, instead, were depicted as less informed about the products, in secondary and dependent roles, within a domestic setting, as unemployed or in “pink collar” jobs (McArthur, Resko, 1975; Panarese, 2014b). Moreover, female characters were usually shown as young, pretty, and married (Schneider, Schneider, 1979; Furnham, Bitar, 1993).

Even when men and women were represented similarly, differences emerged in the roles they had in the commercials and the types of promoted product (Culley, Bennett, 1976; Downs, Harrison, 1985). Women were associated with health and beauty related goods (Furnham, Mak, 1999; Furnham, Paltzer, 2010; Valls-Fernández, Martínez-Vicente, 2007) or cleaning products (Ibroscueva, 2007). Men were related to leisure products, such as sports or alcohol, and technological products, such as cars and consumer electronics (Furnham, Farragher, 2000).

Moreover, some British studies reported male dominance of voice-overs in commercials (Livingstone, Green, 1986; Manstead, McCulloch, 1981), and Verna (1975) discovered that a male audio track was used in the 100% of male-oriented or neutral ads and the 55% of female-oriented commercials.

Thus, many researchers found strong and widespread gender role stereotypes in different countries, such as Australia (Mazzella, Darkin, Cerini, Burralli, 1992), Canada (Rak, McMullen, 1987), Great Britain (Furnham, Bitar, 1993; Furnham, Schofield, 1986; Livingstone, Green, 1986), Spain (Berganza, del Hoyo, 2006; García-Muñoz, Martínez, 2009; Rey Fuentes, 1994; Sánchez Aranda, 2002), and Italy (Furnham, Voli, 1989). Although some national peculiarities, there was a common international pattern in sex-typing on television advertising (Durkin, 1985).

However, after a strong initial interest in gender and advertising studies, during the Seventies and early Eighties, there has been a general decrease of attention to the research in this area. Some scholars stated that everything there was to say about gender stereotypes has already been said. Liesbet Van Zoonen (2011), for example, asked: «we did not know all there was to know about these old media already? What more could we find about the stereotypes of women in advertising?» (p. 3).

Actually, we do not know everything there is to know, for many reasons. First, the research on gender and media had an episodic character in many countries and did not give rise to a consistent trend of studies. In Italy, for example, the scientific analyses have been few and largely dominated by the reflection on the sexualisation and objectification of the female body (Sassatelli, 2006).

Moreover, in the last decades, there has been an increase in public awareness and critical consciousness of gender stereotyping in the media and some international meta-analyses have found a slow reduction in the stereotyped portrayals of men and women (Eased, 2010; Furnham, Mak, 1999; Wolin, 2003). Then, the conservative world of advertising has slightly changed gender representation (Fowles, 1996). Specifically, in Italy, a timid transgression of gender boundaries in men and women portrayals has been recently detected (Panarese, 2014a)

On these bases, a new study of the representation of gender in the Italian television advertising has been carried out. Since in Italy there has been little systematic research on men and women portrayals in commercials, we started from the study of gender representations as a first step of a bigger and deeper analysis that tried to answer the question «what else is there to say?» (Johnson, 2007: 14).

The analysis was a part of a larger study conducted by the GEMMA Observatory of Sapienza, University of Rome¹, whose general task was to investigate the way in which television accepts and encourages a change in the

1. The working group was directed by Milly Buonanno and was composed of Giovanni Ciofalo, Mhaela Gavrila, Franca Faccioli, Silvia Leonzi, Anna Luci Natale, Paola Panarese, and Claudia Polo.

process of construction of identities and gender relations. The specific aims of the study relating to advertising were to determine the extent of sex typing in the Italian commercials and to look for any “new” and more realistic gender representation, because, like Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, «we are more concerned with the ways in which television contributes to change than with mapping the obvious ways in which it maintains dominant viewpoints» (Newcomb, Hirsch, 1984: 70).

3. Method

«While statistics indicate large improvements in women’s representation in the labour force and a more egalitarian role in the household» (Verhellen, Dens, de Pelsmacker, 2014: 3), television advertising continues to depict women in subordinate roles (Bergonza, del Hoyo, 2006; Livingstone, Green, 1986; Luyt, 2011; McArthur, Resko, 1975; Sánchez Aranda, García Ortega, Grandío, Berganzo, 2002) or in sexually appealing roles (Lin, 1998; García Fernández, García Reyes, 2004; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, Zavoina, 1999).

In Italy, commercials, posters and print ads have hosted two main feminine models since the beginning of advertising: the *housewife*, a figure with a discreet beauty and loving attitude, devoted to housekeeping and family; the *sensual woman*, associated with various products and often “objectified” (as in the traditional Peroni Beer commercial *Call me Peroni. I’ll Be your beer*).

Thus, our hypothesis, were:

- H1: Male characters in the Italian television commercials are depicted in major roles than the female characters.
- H2: Women are mainly represented in a parental or housekeeping role, and less frequently in a professional role.
- H3: Women are represented as beautiful and desirable more often than men

To prove the hypothesis, the study analyzed the contents of the six main Italian television networks (RAI 1, RAI 2, RAI 3, Rete 4, Canale 5 and Italia 1), recorded for a week, from Monday to Sunday², between eight in the morning and two at night. Our sample was composed by all the unique broadcasted commercials (815), excluding their repetitions (9979).

To codify and quantify significant data, we used content analysis, intended as a mix between the “classical” Berelson’s approach (1952) and the analysis as investigation. Thus, we built a search tool containing an ordered sequence of questions with which the television commercials were interrogated. Each entry of the survey corresponded to a variable that constituted

2. Every day was chosen in a different week, between February and April 2011, to collect a greater variety of commercials.

the operational definition of a property. The entries were included in the following thematic areas:

- Commercial general features (network, time slot, date of registration, advertiser, product category)
- Commercial formal features (duration, presence of music, sounds or noises, claim, voice-over, spatial and temporal setting, type of shots)
- Characters' features (gender, age group, nationality, sexual orientation, profession, hair colour, eye colour, clothing style, physique, facial aesthetics, degree of exhibited emotion)
- Additional information (presence of cases to be analyzed in depth).

Two different researchers coded each commercial. About the not objective characters' features, such as the aesthetics of the face (coded as beautiful, ugly, neutral/common, and undetectable), the physiques (coded as thin, normal/neither fat nor thin, overweight, and undetectable), the exhibited emotion (coded with a scale from 1, indicating the maximum emotionalism, to 6, indicating the maximum coldness), only the coincident data were considered. In the rare cases in which the two encodings did not match, we classified the data as undetectable.

4. Results

The content analysis concerned 815 unique advertisements, out of a total of 9979 commercials, containing 1798 characters. It provided interesting results, but not entirely unexpected. So we also carried out a qualitative analysis on same case studies, selected because they offer "different" sex role portrayals. The findings of the qualitative analysis were quite impressive.

4.1 *The content analysis findings*

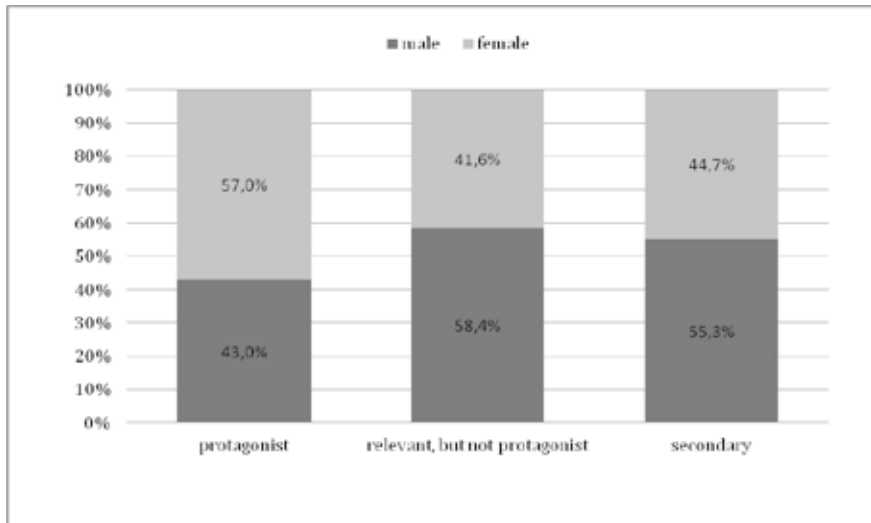
All the hypotheses were confirmed. Although female characters appeared first and were more numerous among the protagonists (Figure 1) and endorser (Figure 2), their portrayals were quite traditional. They were mainly depicted as housewives, driven by a male voice-over³, more numerous among the common characters (buyers and housewives in which the target can be identified), but not among the experts (such as doctors, dentists, and researchers).

Moreover, women were mainly represented in a parental or housekeeping role, and less frequently in a professional role. They dominated in a domestic setting, but not in public spaces, business contexts and workplaces (Figure 3). 100% of the housewives were females, and all the workmen were male.

3. In more than 90% of the sample, there is a voice-over, and it is male in two cases out of tree. This result is related to the traditional guarantee function of the advertising voice, confirmed by the age of the speaker (an adult in 8 cases out of 10).

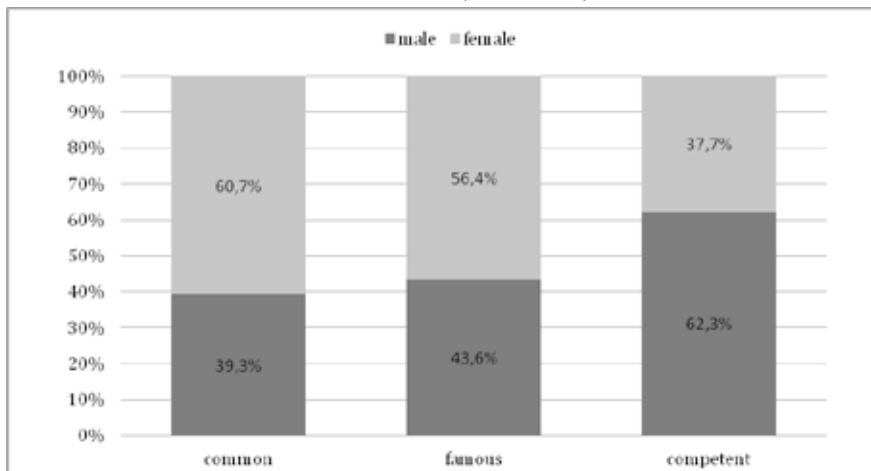
There were a few women among professionals, entrepreneurs, managers, and teachers (Figure 4) and there was the same number of male and female characters only among the retired people. Thus, the most common portrayals depicted women as housewives or at rest (both at home), rather than workers.

FIGURE 1. ROLE OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS (PERCENTAGES)



Database: 1798

FIGURE 2. TYPE OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS (PERCENTAGES)



Database: 1798

FIGURE 3. SETTING AND MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS (PERCENTAGES)

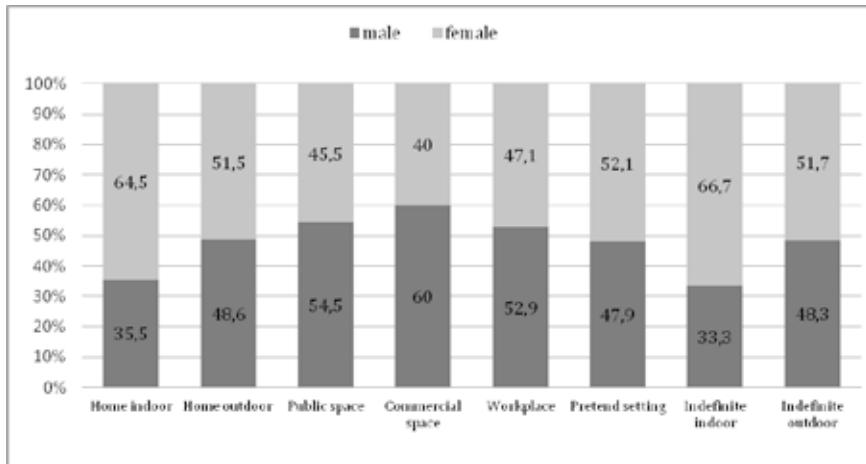
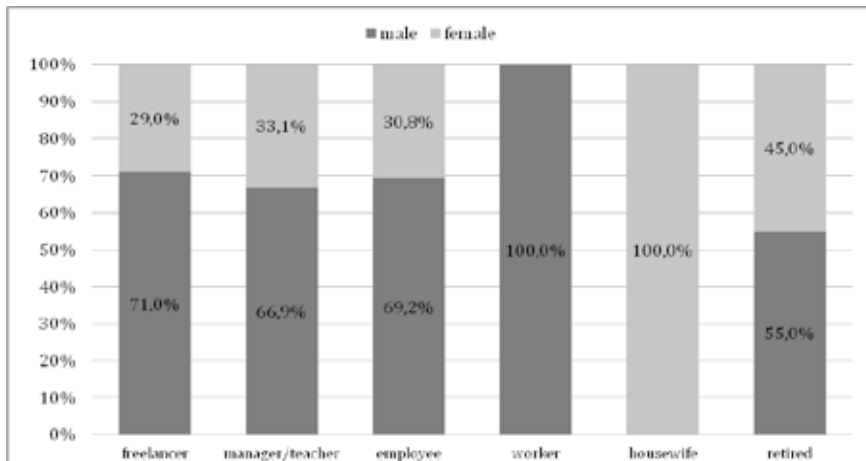
*Database: 1798*

FIGURE 4. WORK OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS (PERCENTAGES)

*Database: 1798*

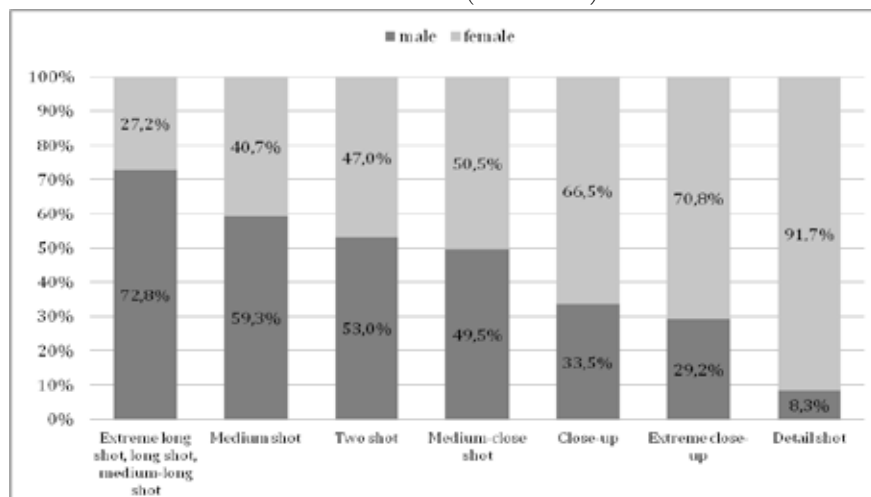
Finally, women were represented as beautiful and desirable more often than men. They were younger than men. Over 80% of the skinny figures were a female. Beautiful faces were feminine in four cases out of five. The less conventional (and probably more attractive for the Italian male) eyes or hair colours were the prerogatives of the female characters (all the red-haired people, for example, were women, as just as the 80% of the blonds). Most of

the grey, black or white hair-coloured people were men. Women also dominated among those with blue or green eyes, respectively in three cases out of four and in two out of three.

Thus, in the Italian TV advertising there were a lot of young, skinny, and exotic beauties.

In addition, the female characters were mainly shooting in close-up while medium shots or long shots predominated for men. That was an indication of the differences in the gaze on gender: the camera focused on faces, eyes, shoulders, legs or breast, probably to exalt women's beauty (especially in the cosmetics commercials) (Figure 5). One of the consequences of these shots was the emphasis on the female emotions. Not surprisingly, over 70% of the cases of a marked display of feelings concerned women. However, regardless of the expectations, the sensual woman was not a very familiar figure in the sample. This portrayal often appeared in the commercials of products, like underwear, related to seduction⁴.

FIGURE 5. SHOTS OF THE MALE AND FEMALE BODIES (PERCENTAGES)



Database: 1798

Anyway, many of the analyzed figures seemed a crystallization of the traditional advertising models. The image of the wife and the mother prevailed over the others, as in the *Quattro salti in padella* ready-to-eat meals commercial, that used the typical registers and scenarios used in the Sixties advertisements and defined the female protagonist as “mother” and “wife”. Its claims were:

4. An ad of the brand Intimissimi, for example, consisted in only close-ups of the model Irina Shaykhlislamova's body, wearing panties and bra and staging that feminine touch well depicted by Goffman (1979).

“Attention wife! Do you want to go out for dinner? Do not propose this meal to your husband!”; “Attention wife! Your husband does not say a word during the dinner? Remove the dish from the table!”; “Attention moms! This meal keeps children at home beyond age 40”. According to its creators, this was an ironic campaign, because it referred to past and invited mothers and wives to not defrost the ready-to-eat meals, while having the intent to get it done. However, despite the intention, it reminded old stereotypes not completely outdated in the Italian culture.

4.2 *The qualitative analysis outcomes*

If the content analysis revealed many old-fashioned images, the qualitative analysis showed some glimmers of novelty. The new gender portrayals were related to women appearance in only one case, a *Dove's* commercial, populated by less young, skinny and perfect women than in the rest of advertising. The ad was part of a campaign born in the 2004, dedicated to the promotion of natural beauty and to the enhancement of feminine self-esteem. In the sample, we found the *Real Beauty Sketches* commercial, a video showing Gil Zamora, an FBI forensic sketch artist, drawing two different sketches for seven women. The first sketch was based on the personal description of each woman; the second sketch was based on the description given by a stranger she has just met. By comparing the two portraits, it is evident that women perceive and describe themselves as less attractive than they are.

More interesting were the ads where women were depicted as professionals and ambitious workers, inserted in different workplaces and not confined at home, flanked by men and not driven by them. These portrayals appeared in a *Calzedonia's* commercial, whose claim was “Sisters of Italy”. It showed different women in different moments of their lives, followed by the dedication: “To Italia, Vittoria, Laura and all the others”, accompanied by the notes of a female version of the Italian hymn.

This ad was not entirely new: it displayed beautiful and emotive women with many close-ups of their charming faces and shapely legs, but also showed various female identities.

Moreover, a really different image of the mother was found in a *Fastweb* commercial, performing a multitasking woman, described as a *heroine*, with an *extraordinary normality* because she was able to manage both family and career.

The dual role of worker and housewife, together with the rare function of guaranteeing, appeared in an ad for children's *Mellin milk*, whose claim was “I study it as a researcher, I choose it as a mom.” The figure of the scientist woman who granted the quality of a product also occurred in a *Lines è tampons* commercials that showed a team of female researchers and used the slogan “Designed by women for you”.

These two last cases were only partly innovative. Their novelty was limited by the fact that the researchers were given as guarantors of feminine or childish products, competent not only for their profession, but also for their gender.

Also the innovations related to the men's images were limited by the context. In fact, we found some commercials in which men took care of children (*Batticuori*, *Conad*), prepared meals (*Knorr*), gave advice about house cleaning products (*Bio Presto*, *Dash*) or were used as a sexual object. However, the ads where men are the guarantors of food products, for example, involved two chefs, who appeared in a domestic space, but were presented as professionals. And the sensual man appeared in a limited number of ads and repeated many of the clichés of the representation of the sensual woman, as in a *Dolce and Gabbana* men's perfume commercial, where the sculpted body of a beautiful model was shooting with extreme close-ups.

Thus, despite some exceptions, men and women continued to occupy different areas of expertise and still revealed few points of contact.

Not surprisingly, the hybrid or transgender figures were almost entirely absent from the sample. There was only one case, in a *Mercedes* commercial, that showed a gay bar, connoting it as ambiguous and threatening and describing its frequenters as abnormal and vaguely disturbing. Apart from the questionable content - which aroused much controversy - the gay identities were shown only in this case and seemed bizarre and threatening.

5. Discussion

If we consider some particular commercials - as in the qualitative analysis - it seems that something has changed in the gender representation of the Italian television advertising.

Among the novelties there are portrayals of women depicted in activities different from house cleaning or cooking. Competent professionals who try to combine work and family life. Women who appear not only in domestic spaces, but also in workplaces or on the public scene. Natural beauties less used as sensual women than expected. Likewise also men are more often represented at home, in the role of fathers, exhibiting consumption behaviour, as well as the productive ones.

Thus, there is a timid transgression or evolution of gender boundaries in the Italian television advertising.

Indeed, Italian women and men are characters in motion. A plot of more and more widespread transformations, aspirations and behaviours has contributed to redefine their biographical, educational, occupational and emotional trajectories in the last decades.

Women, in particular, live and promote a rapid change. They are probably the most dynamic component of the society, the ones that are changing more quickly their social, cultural and economic coordinates, helping to influence the development of the country.

However, the advertising representation of this movement is slow, as in *slow motion*, and still far from a realistic representation of gender.

The detected innovations are too few to permit generalizations, and the overall analysis shows still divided male and female identities, whose relation

is not in the reduction of differences, but in their representation in a new and more subtle form. Particularly, on the one hand, the images of the Italian advertising reassure traditional identities, while pushing them towards consumptions that destabilize the gender order, as in the commercial for ready-to-eat meals, promoted by an old-fashioned housewife. On the other hand, they encourage a new attention to gender complexity, anchoring it to consumption related to traditional roles, such as in the case of professional women endorsing feminine or childish products.

When advertising attempts to grapple with “different” images, it does it in a stereotypical and hyperbolic way. This is what happens in the commercials that focus on a flashy homosexuality or in those that turn men into sexual objects.

Moreover, the space for gender ambiguity or sexual orientation diversity is almost imperceptible in the sample. Beyond the only case reported, in the rare Italian commercials of the past, the transgender figures appear as anomalies and disguises, rather than as fluid and unconventional sexual identities.

Thus, despite some small novelties in the sex role portrayals, the analysis reveals that there was no truly rich and balanced perspective on masculinity and femininity in the Italian television advertising.

This result is understandable if we consider the complexity and variety of gender identity, the channel and the form of communication analyzed, and the main methodology used. Because of their multidimensional and moving identities, the female and male worlds are too difficult to be represented in few seconds. Thus, no wonder that at first sight the study returns a general static image of gender identity, mostly crystallized on old clichés and replicating the results of studies dating back to forty years ago.

For what concerns the channel, we have studied the Italian television, a medium used to achieve a large and mature audience in a short time, giving much space to the commercials of convenience goods. Hence the tendency towards caution and the preference for tradition.

Moreover, the analyzed form of communication, advertising, must be able to capture the attention of an elusive target in few moments and to convey a message that should be understandable and memorable, despite the information overload. No wonder if it uses stereotypes, clichés or hyperboles.

Regarding the research method, the main part of the study is based on the content analysis, limited to frequency counts of role portrayals that yield rather superficial and somewhat self-evident inferences (Ferguson, Kreshel, Tinkham, 1990).

6. Conclusions and implications

Thus, the research reveals that a few new advertising images are exceptions that prove the rule. It is not a surprising or innovative result, but it is a necessary basis for updating the Italian study of gender and advertising and building new and more profound analysis.

Hence, the intention to move beyond the research on the sex-role stereotypes framework, to use different methods to overcome the limitations of content analysis, to examine the persuasive implications of gender representation and the intra-gender and inter-gender dynamics.

Particularly, we think that the study of gender and media should carry out a comprehensive analysis of the representations, the public, and the media practices, considering not only the gender portrayals, but also the audience's readings, and the advertising production processes that lead to the constructions of a certain representation.

For these reasons, the presented research should be considered as the first step in a long path. A survey that can help to renew the Italian study on gender and advertising, with the awareness that the topic is more complex than it seems, and the issues are much more nuanced than in the past.

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