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## How Do Family Background and Self-Esteem Affect an Individual's Perception of Gender-Role Portrayal in Online Advertisements?

Cera T. Crowe

Winthrop University, crowec2@winthrop.edu

Aimee P. Meader Dr.

Winthrop University, meadera@winthrop.edu

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# How Do Family Background and Self-Esteem Affect an Individual's Perception of Gender-Role Portrayal in Online Advertisements?

Cera Crowe  
Aimee Meader, Ph.D. (Mentor)

“The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I may love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.” —W.H. Auden

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to further understand the relationship of family background and how it affects self-esteem and the perception of gender roles in online imagery. This study focuses on how our history serves as a lens to see gender roles. The schema theory, created by Robert Axelrod, is a model suggesting that people have a “pre-existing assumption about the way the world is organized” (Axelford, 1974). Furthering this theory is Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory, which proposes that one's sexual self-concept affects how one structures items in memory. These theories, applied to the understood roles and activities that we see our parents perform, should relate to how we see people in the media take on certain roles and activities in online advertisements. The method for collecting data is a survey broken down into questions of demographics, family history, self-esteem, and ten randomized advertisements portraying traditional, decorative, and non-traditional gender roles for both men and women. If we can begin to understand the relationship between family background and advertisement effectiveness, then advertisers can see the real cultural values and changing gender-role identities in consumers.

## INTRODUCTION

The schema theory, created by Robert Axelrod, is a model (see Figure 1) suggesting that people have a “pre-existing assumption about the way the world is organized” (Axelford, 1974). In relation to advertising, information is sent and then received by an audience. The audience interprets this message based on information currently available to the audience such as past experience, repetition of outcomes, and relationship to currently understood “truths.” This theory, applied to the understood roles and activities that we see our parents perform, is expected to correlate to how we see media personnel take on certain roles and activities in online advertisements. This study is unlike most published studies related to gender roles and self-esteem in advertising because it does not focus on body dissatisfaction; it instead focuses on why our family history makes us see gender roles the way we do.

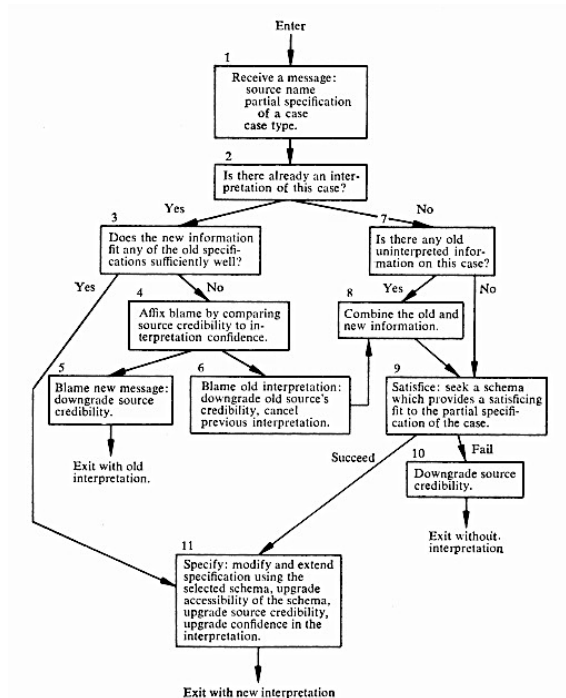


Figure 1. Process Model for Schema Theory.

### *Online Advertising*

Online advertising serves a variety of purposes including offering worldwide coverage of advertising messages and projecting corporate identity. Examples of online advertising include banner ads, search engine result pages, social-networking ads, email spam, online classified ads, pop-ups, contextual ads, spyware, and targeted advertising based on your search history (Janssen, n.d.). The difference between online advertising and other forms of media (such as print and cable television), is the promotion of product information without any geographical limitations. With all forms of advertising comes the creation of “consumer culture.” Culture refers to the whole set of meanings, beliefs, attitudes and ways of doing things that are shared by some homogenous social group and are typically handed down from generation to generation. With consumer culture, advertisers are given the power to create a culture in which consumers see themselves. Consumer culture has been defined as a society in which human values have been “grotesquely distorted so that the commodities become more important than people or, in an alternative formulation, commodities become not ends in themselves but overvalued means for acquiring acceptable ends like love and friendship” (Schudson, 1984, p. 7). This definition becomes increasingly true when the method of human interaction is now largely done from behind a screen. Digital devices are increasingly intersecting with what we understand as our human identity. When creating consumer culture, “advertisers have almost always relied on stereotypes to establish rapport with consumers and move on to more important information about the product or service being advertised. It is efficient for advertising to use gendered stereotypes because the scene becomes immediately set” (Sheehan, 2014 p. 100). Online advertising allows advertisers to use click-through rates and HTTP cookies to see what consumers are interested in. These tools allow advertisers to have more efficient data when creating target markets. When setting the scene, advertisers operate with a target audience in mind when selling certain types of product. Targeting, or relating a product to a

certain demographic, is the basis behind the role-product congruity theory. The role-product congruity theory suggests that advertising effectiveness can be increased when appropriate models are used (Sheehan, 2014 p. 103). This means creating a gender-role, ethnicity, and an assumption of a cultural normalcy to the identity of a product or brand.

### *Gender-Role Portrayal*

Advertising generally operates on the appearance of binary sexes, or male and female individuals. Men and women are understood to be very different. The variations between the two genders include body characteristics, role in the home, role in child rearing, and the expectation of societal position. Gender stereotypes are general beliefs about sex-linked traits and roles, psychological characteristics, and behaviors describing women and men. Gender identities are often socially constructed, and advertising proposes lifestyles and forms of self-presentation that individuals use to define their roles in society (Giddens, 1991; Wolf, 1991). Gender roles have changed socially and economically since the 1940s. Around the world, women are delaying marriage to increase their educational and career opportunities (Sheehan, 2014 p. 90). In 1940, women comprised about 20% of the workforce in the United States, while today that percentage is 57% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). Men with children under 18 years old have 93% participation in the labor force, while women with children under 18 years old have 70% participation in the labor force (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). Although women are more represented in the workforce than in previous decades, the historical role of homemaker still lingers in the media. Deciphering these gender differences and characteristics is not an easy task for media creators. Advertisements where people are portrayed, typically can be categorized into four groups (and sometimes hybrids of multiple groups) for both men and women: traditional, decorative, non-traditional, and neutral.

- Traditional is the expected stereotypical role of a gender.

- Non-traditional is the unexpected or unforeseen role of a gender.
- Decorative is when a gender is shown concerned with physical attractiveness or sex objects.
- Neutral is when men and women are portrayed as equal.

#### *Women*

Traditional role portrayal for women is that of a dependent home-maker and housewife (Plakoyiannaki, 2008; Sheenan, 2014 p. 92). “Advertising has firmly held on to this portrayal of women as homemakers and uses this imagery to promote all types of products from household goods to computers and automobiles” (Sheehan 2014 p. 91). The implications associated with the female traditional gender role portrayal is that of the male non-traditional gender role portrayal. The frequency of imagery affiliated with females as the head of child rearing and homemaking can cause men to feel as if they are inadequate as partners.

Decorative role portrayal is when a woman is “shown concerned with physical attractiveness and sex objects” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008; Sheenan 2014 p.98). Displaying women in a decorative role has been the subject of numerous studies related to body dissatisfaction and depression. The cult of beauty is age old and clinging steadily to every generation. In fairytales, good women are pretty and evil queens are old and ugly. Physical attractiveness is taught to children as a symbolic representation of internal good. The current generation has an obsession with appearance like no other generation preceding it. People no longer simply worry about our physical appearance in the presence of others, but also on our social media and other accounts. Our concern for appearance is beyond just what we think we look like, and how others see us— but now it’s the “idea” of us. A study of advertising globally (Peak et al., 2011) found that women are four times more likely to be presented visually (without a speaking role) than males. The fact that women tend to be portrayed in decorative roles more than men suggests that advertisements do not render a realistic

depiction of the female gender role (Paff & Lakner, 1997). When decorative roles and sexual imagery is used, advertisements often include nonverbal cues as an indication that women lack authority and possess less power than men (Simmons, 1986). Body language and size relationship often suggest that women are submissive toward products, while men are pictured in control (Goffman, 1979). Take for example this Gucci advertisement:



The implications of this role portrayal make it harder for women to be seen in the non-traditional role, traditional role, and neutral role. If a woman is frequently shown as a sex object and concerned with physical attractiveness, then it possibly undermines other roles she may strive to be.

Women in non-traditional roles are depicted as career-oriented, doing non-traditional activities, and as voices of authority (Plakoyiannaki, 2008). Their body language isn’t submissive or allocating their power to any person or product. Current films and television attempt at portraying strong female characters but falter by adding in sexuality or dependency. The female protagonist in modern cinema is becoming more common (The Hunger Games, 2012; Insurgent, 2015; Black Widow from the Avengers, 2012). Yet the amount of male lead roles with heroic capabilities greatly outnumbers those with women lead roles. If women are portrayed as capable and strong, they are usually coupled with a strong male partner or group of

males. The relationship is often sexually charged.

Neutral role portrayal is when a woman is portrayed as equal to a man. This role is particularly hard to determine to an untrained eye because one must look at size relationship, body language, text, and activity in terms of equal representation to that of the man pictured. Advertisements that target the entire world with an enveloping message related to concepts of humanity do this really well. An example of this is Coca-Cola's campaign on "Open happiness." Everyone can identify with happiness— men and women of international ethnicities were portrayed.

### *Men*

Traditional role portrayal of men is the breadwinning husband in a suit who works a daytime job. Males are usually shown with economic, physical, or societal authority. The idea of the male as the protector is as timeless as the damsel in distress. A man is portrayed as hardened, anchored, and resolute in his course of action. It is expected of the man to protect and provide, and not show vulnerability. This is a stereotype that deprives men of their humanity. It should not be abnormal to see a human being express vulnerability, uncertainty, fear, or sadness.

Like female decorative role portrayal, male decorative role portrayal is also concerned with physical attractiveness and sex objects. The difference is that rather than being submissive to the person or product, the male holds power over the person and product. Erving Goffman, a leader in verbal cues, says that power can usually be located in the body language (Goffman, 1979). Examples of this include the stance of the male, gaze, and grip. While a female in the decorative role is shown with an averted gaze (licensed withdrawal), the male is shown with an anchored forward gaze. Fairytales again serve as an excellent example of decorative roles. The prince is expected to be handsome, strong, and courageous.

Non-traditional role portrayal for men is that of a confident child caretaker, doing housework, and/or depicted as vulnerable. Some advertisements *attempt* equality in parenting by presenting images of fathers who

are "childish but loveable goofballs" (Crain, 2001), irresponsible fathers and lazy foolish husbands (Sacks & Smaglick, 2008). This could be a societal inconsistency if such images are not balanced with other images showing men as confident and capable in traditional house making situations (Sheehan 2014, p. 94).

Neutral role portrayal is when a man is portrayed as equal to a woman. This role is particularly hard to determine because you must look at size relationship, body language, text, and activity in terms of equal representation to that of a woman.

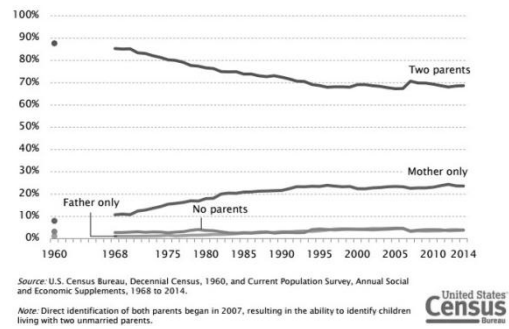
### *The Modern Family and Self-Esteem*

Targeting an audience is a key factor in advertising. So it is important for advertisers to understand the changing relationships happening amongst consumers and families. The traditional family is the "natural reproductive unit" of mom, pop, and the children all living under one roof. It is a social construct that varies from culture to culture, and overtime, the definition changes within a culture (Stephens, 2012). That is exactly what is happening in the United States. Variations of the non-traditional family are increasing. A non-traditional family is any family unit outside of the traditional nuclear family. This includes but is not limited to a single parent family, divorced parent family, step family, widowed-parent family, cohabiting couple with children, same sex family, a relative serving as a parent that is neither the mother nor father, and a single person who chooses adoption (Stephens, 2012). A very notable trend is that marriage is decreasing over time (Figure MS-1a and Figure MS-1b). This could possibly be because women are choosing education and career goals over marriage, relationships are facing new challenges, or cohabiting couples are content without further commitment. The decrease in marriage trends could also factor into why the two parent living arrangements of children is decreasing over time (Figure CH-1). Thirty-two percent of families in the United States, as of 2013, are single parent families (Figure TF-1).

Family structure gives us something to relate the world to and helps us understand who we are. "Personality theorists who are concerned with constructs involving the self put great

importance to parent-child interaction in the development of self. This notion follows from such general ideas as these: (a) the self-concept is a learned constellation of perceptions, cognitions, and values. (b) An important part of this learning comes from observing the reactions one gets from other persons. (c) The parents are the persons who are present earliest and most consistently. For this reason, and because of the child's dependence on them, the parents have a unique opportunity to reinforce selectively the child's learning" (Wylie 1961 p. 121). Self-esteem is an overall evaluation of one's worth or value. American families are changing, and by association, so are attitudes toward ourselves and gender responsibilities.

Figure CH-1  
Living arrangements of children: 1960 to present



Type of families with children under 18, 2013 annual averages

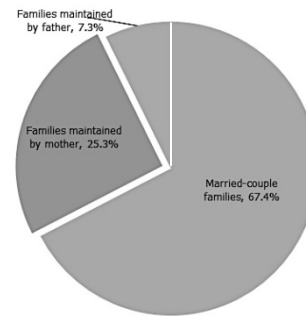


Figure MS-1a  
Men's marital status: 1950 to present

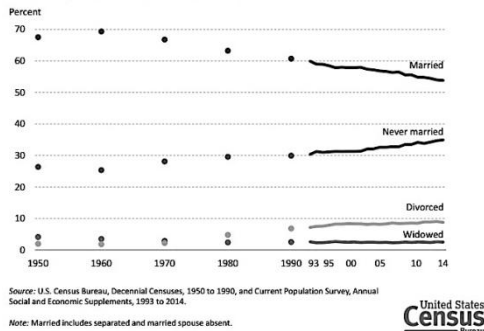
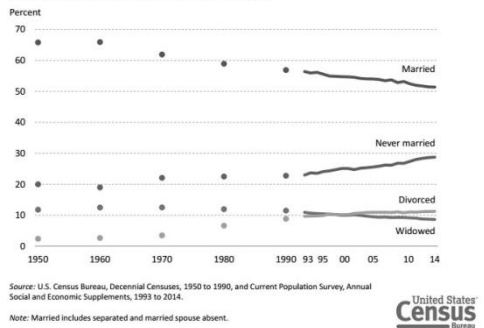


Figure MS-1b  
Women's marital status: 1950 to present



## METHODOLOGY

To address the research question, individuals' family history selection and self-esteem scores are compared to their advertisement effectiveness score. To collect data, an online survey was created using Qualtrics. The survey first asks basic demographic questions (race, gender, age, marital status, family background) and then uses Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. Thirty-seven participants were from a traditional family and fifteen participants came from a non-traditional family. Forty-one participants were female and eleven were male. Because we did not want race relatability to affect advertisement effectiveness, there will be two versions of the following section of the survey (that are as identical in content as possible), one with Caucasian representative ads and another with African American representative ads. Each gender role portrayal was matched in content in both surveys. Participants who selected other racial groups (besides Caucasian and African American) were directed to the end of the

survey. A lot of time was invested in content analysis of advertisements and it was not within the means of this study to create a survey for each race. This decision was also made with expected participation audience in mind. Qualifying participants were then shown ten advertisements randomized— three male advertisements (traditional, non-traditional, and decorative), three female advertisements (traditional, non-traditional, and decorative), one neutral advertisement (male and female portrayed as equal), and three decoy advertisements to hide the nature of the survey. A majority of these advertisements (18 out of 20) are borrowed from fifty companies (cited and manipulated to meet Fair Use copyright limitations) listed on Forbes “The World’s Most Valuable Brands” during the month of May 2015. The remaining two advertisements were the female non-traditional gender role portrayal. Because they were not found represented on websites belonging to “The World’s Most Valuable Brands,” they were created using Adobe Photoshop.

Using content analysis, hundreds of advertisements were looked at and coded into (a) gender role portrayal and (b) targeted race of audience. Only the advertisements that fit each gender role portrayal most exclusively were used in the final survey. Each advertisement is rectangular and shown for precisely ten seconds, as rectangles constitute the bulk of online advertising and are used by almost all advertising agencies and corporations employing electronic media. Ads other than neutral and decoy ones only have one adult pictured. Advertisements were only selected if the product advertised was global, as captured through its international reputation. After each advertisement, a general question about content and reaction questions related to advertisement effectiveness were asked (enjoyment, trustworthiness, and relatability).

*Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed using mixed ANOVA in SPSS Statistics.

A 2 (Family Type: Traditional, Nontraditional) X 2 (Gender: Men, Women) X 3 (Role: Traditional, Nontraditional, Decorative) X 3

(Rating: Enjoyment, Trustworthiness, Relatability) Mixed ANOVA with Family Type as the only between-subjects variable.

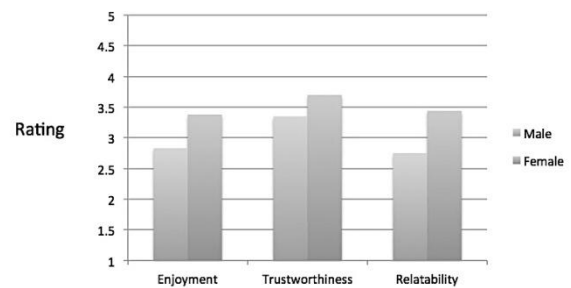
The four way effect (Gender X Role X Rating X Family Type) was not significant,  $F(4, 204) = 0.57, p > .05$ . None of effects involving family background were significant, all  $F_s < 1.15, p_s > .32$ .

The Gender X Role X Rating interaction was significant,  $F(4, 204) = 3.28, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .06$  (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

All effects that did not involve family background were significant, all  $F_s > 5.83, p_s < .05$ .

**RESULTS**

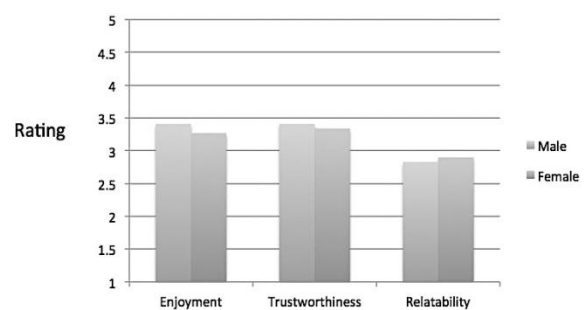
**Traditional Role**



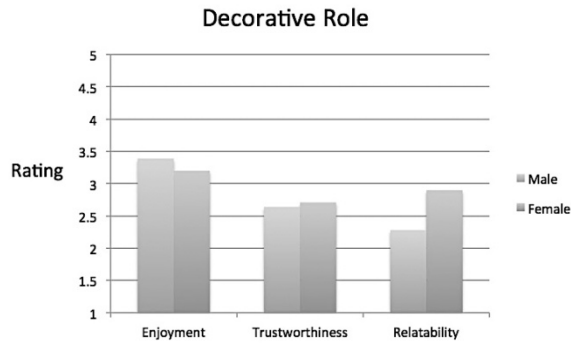
Women shown in traditional roles are rated higher than men in traditional roles in enjoyment, trustworthiness, and relatability.

Trustworthiness is rated higher than enjoyment and relatability for both men and women.

**Non-Traditional Role**



Enjoyment and trust are rated higher than relatability for both men and women when shown images of people in the non-traditional gender role.



Overall, decorative role portrayal is less favored than traditional and non-traditional

Participants stated they relate themselves and their experiences to the images of females portrayed in decorative roles, more than males in decorative roles.

### DISCUSSION

Family background did not factor into the perception of gender roles in imagery. This could be the reality of how people process advertisements, or it could occur because of a low sample size in participants or advertisements. There are many factors that go into measuring the influence that our parents have on our decision making process. The survey could be improved by measuring this effect more adequately. Another explanation could be that people self-monitor more when interacting with advertisements because they are so accustomed to them. Although frequency and time was measured on each ad while taking the survey, participants come desensitized to advertisements. Furthermore, the results may have occurred because of the restriction to a two-dimensional, ten second image. Online advertisements may not allow for memories and relationship recognition like other forms of media.

Self-esteem did not fluctuate significantly between traditional and non-

traditional family types. Family structure could not be the significant factor here, but instead the quality of the relationship with the parental role and the amount of interest they invest into developing a child. Alternatively, self-esteem greatly operates independently of family structure.

The data showed the decorative role portrayal is less favored than traditional and non-traditional role portrayal. Decorative ads challenge societal norms of what should or should not be exposed in terms of body parts. This is an example of Schema Theory at work. We know what is acceptable in society and we react accordingly. It is particularly interesting that decorative ads are so frequently presented to the public, yet they are less favored. It is often said that “sex sells” but according to the data, this may not be the case.

Participants stated they relate themselves and their experiences to the images of females portrayed in decorative roles, more than males in decorative roles. This could be a response created by the more frequent images of females in decorative roles in comparison to men in the public. The relevance of this information is that men and women relate themselves personally with images of women portrayed sexually more than they do with men. The implications of this are both positive and negative. First, it could show that women are satisfied enough in their sexuality and body to relate their life to a decorative ad. Secondly it could mean that women and men are desensitized to the female figure more than the male figure. Also it could show a societal neglect towards men when expressing their sexuality.

### FUTURE PLANS

From my study I learned that our upbringing does not affect our immediate measured reaction to gender roles in imagery. Each variable examined, self-esteem, family influence, and gender role, proved to be very complex and are key defining components to human nature. The study was ambitiously interdisciplinary and that is the nature of research in communications and the social sciences. If I were to continue this study, I would perform content analysis of ideas and



campaigns in actual advertising agencies. I would cross reference that information with the background and self concepts of the designers themselves. They have more notable and measurable feelings towards their work than an audience seeing an image for mere seconds. These agencies could also provide me with data on how many people they reach. In the meantime, I am putting this project on hold. In the summer of 2016, I will begin studying media's relationship with the environment and sustainable business practices under the guidance of Dr. Padmini Patwardhan. If you would like more information about me, my study, or my future plans, please feel free to contact me at [crowec2@winthrop.edu](mailto:crowec2@winthrop.edu).

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