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

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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 why our history makes us see gender roles the way we do. The schema theory, created by Robert Axelrod, is a model suggesting that people have a "pre-existing assumption about the world in general." 

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 models 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-identity roles in consumers.

INTRODUCTION

Online advertising provides coverage of advertising messages and projecting corporate identity without any geographical limitations. 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. Advertisements portraying people typically can be categorized into four groups (and sometimes hybrids of multiple) for both men and women; traditional, decorative, non-traditional and neutral. For more visual examples of gender-role portrayals and definitions see the table accompanying this poster. Gender identities are often socially constructed, and advertising promotes lifestyles and forms of self-presentation that individuals use to define their roles in society (Foucault, 1998; Giddens, 1991).

To target an audience, 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, dad, and the children all living under one roof. It is a social construct that varies from culture to culture, and over time, the definition changes within a culture (Stephens, 2015). That is exactly what is happening in the United States. Variations of the non-traditional family are increasing (see Figure CH-1 on handout). A non-traditional family is any family unit outside of the traditional nuclear family.

METHODS

Online Survey. Created using Quantrics and only taken from personal computers or laptops.

Demographics, Family History, and Self-Esteem. The survey first asks questions about race, gender, age, marital status, family background, exposure of internet use, and then uses Rosenberg's self-esteem scale (1989). This data was then be compared to advertisement effectiveness scores. 38 participants came from a traditional family and 15 participants came from a non-traditional family. 41 participants were female and 11 participants were male.

Advertisements. Because we did not want race relatability to affect advertisement effectiveness, there are 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 or African American) were directed to the end of the survey. A lot of time was invested in the selection of advertisements and it was not within the means of this study to create a survey for each race. Qualifying participants then see 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 50) 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 (if possible). All advertisements that fit each gender portrayal most exclusively were used in the final survey. Each advertisement is rectangular and shown for 30 seconds. All advertisements were then shown in random order to ensure that no gender role portrayal was more favored.

RESULTS

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.

Overall, decorative role portrayal is less favored than traditional and non-traditional role portrayal. This could be because the Id is in conflict with the ego in expressing desires so it is inconvenient to be shown Decorative ads. Also Decorative ads challenge societal norms of what 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 frequency presented to the public, yet they are less favored.

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 an accepted truth because the most 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. Second 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. This effect contributes to gender schema theory in that we relate our physical attractiveness to how we react to images of physically attractive people.

DISCUSSION

• Family background did not factor into the perception of gender roles in imagery. This could be reality or occur because of a low sample size. Another explanation could be that people self-monitor more when interacting with reality versus virtual reality. A timed two-dimensional image doesn't 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 relationships within a family unit.

• Decorative role portrayal is less favored than traditional and non-traditional role portrayal. This could be because the Id is in conflict with the ego in expressing desires so it is inconvenient to be shown Decorative ads. Also Decorative ads challenge societal norms of what 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.

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OBJECTIVE

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