

Beauty and the beast: The realistic reflection of women in television commercials?



“A woman’s place is in the kitchen – barefoot and pregnant”, was a sentiment that was common in years past. Reflecting that reality, advertisers have been criticised for stereotyping gender roles in this manner before. Women can be depicted in a number of different ways in advertising but, despite the evolution of gender thinking and the advent of feminism, they are still portrayed in stereotypical roles. This begs the question: do South African adverts follow suit? Is this still the prevailing role portrayal of females in South African television commercials?

Taking into consideration the fact that people develop thinking patterns based on the adverts that they are exposed to, stereotypical gender roles are seen as societal norms. Prior research shows that despite changes in society and movements like the feminist revolution, women in television commercials are not shown in powerful roles. Even with the increase in the importance of women in the workplace, women are still featured in stereotypical portrayals in television commercials, depicting roles such as the housewife, mother or sex object.

Previous research also indicates that the roles women portray in advertising have a number of associated product/service categories. These roles commonly link to personal care products, household products, food and clothing products - to name a few. The real question at hand is to what extent do television commercials in South Africa portray the realistic role of the modern woman? Research shows that in order for marketers to effectively convey an advertising message to their target market, they make use of advertising appeals. There are two types of appeals, namely, rational appeals and emotional appeals. On the one hand, rational appeals focus on the practical and functional needs of a consumer, whilst emotional appeals aim to influence feelings. Ultimately, advertisers can combine both appeals.

A study was undertaken by [Dr Tania Maree](#) as part of her [Doctoral studies](#) (and now staff member in the [Department of Marketing Management](#) at the University of Pretoria - with supervisors Proffs [Jordaan](#) and North) in order to identify the roles women portray in South African television commercials. A sample of 245 commercials featuring women was content analysed. The study also investigated: the number and type of product/service categories advertised in the commercials; the product/service categories advertised for various roles portrayed by women in the commercials and whether advertisers prefer to make use of rational and/or emotional appeals. The study focused on advertisements featuring women on SABC 1, 2, 3 and e.tv, all of which are free-to-air channels.

The results of the study demonstrate that, even though half of the workforce in South Africa consists of women, advertisers prefer to focus on a woman’s social image rather than her professional image. Interestingly, the study found that the traditional stereotypical

roles of homemaker and mother were not prevalent in the commercials. Instead, women are most often portrayed as product users and least often as sex objects. In terms of product categories, women feature most often in advertising for personal care items. Moreover South African advertisers associate women with rational, practical purchase motives rather than more commonly expected emotional ones. The results indicate that women are not stereotyped in South African television advertising and South African advertisers are aware of the evolving purchasing and societal role of women.

The full reference for this study is:

Holtzhausen, T, Jordaan, Y & North, EJ. 2011. The portrayal of women in South African television commercials. *Southern African Business Review*, 15(3):167-183 – also available via [UP Space](#).