Exploring Gender Stereotypes in Infant and Toddler Product Advertisements through Visual Content Analysis

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Abstract
This study utilizes visual content analysis to examine gender stereotypes in advertisements for infant and toddler products. Advertisements convey gender stereotypes by presenting individual images, linking gender to specific products, and influencing the reception and understanding of advertising messages. The research indicates that female images in advertisements are often associated with stereotypes related to appearance, body type, and quality. These images are frequently linked to lifestyle, consumer goods, or service products. In contrast, scientific, productive, or authoritative products are often endorsed by male figures. Therefore, female images dominate in advertisements for infant and toddler products. This study primarily focuses on cover advertisements for infant and toddler products, encompassing various product categories and themes to ensure representativeness. Through visual content analysis, 61 randomly collected cover advertisements were analyzed. In summary, this study aims to determine the extent to which infant and toddler advertisements reflect or challenge traditional gender stereotypes and to understand the current state of using gender stereotypes in advertising.

Keywords
Gender stereotypes, infant and toddler product advertisements, visual content analysis, advertising messages, gender roles

1. Introduction
Gender stereotypes refer to societal fixed, stereotypical, and discriminatory notions and expectations based on gender (Lindsey, 2020). These stereotypes influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors regarding gender roles, assigning different roles, responsibilities, and expectations to males and females in society. Furthermore, these stereotypes have profound effects on societal norms, expectations, and the division of labor between genders (Rudman & Glick, 2021).

Gender stereotypes and their representation in advertisements have long been a focal point of academic research and societal concern. Gender stereotypes in advertisements are conveyed through the portrayal of individuals, associating their gender with certain products, thus influencing the processing of advertising messages.

Researchers widely argue that female images in advertisements predominantly exhibit stereotypical notions regarding their appearance, body, and qualities, often appearing in association with lifestyle, consumer-oriented, or service-related products, while scientific, productive, or authoritative products are often endorsed by male figures (Furnham & Voli, 1989). Consequently, in infant and toddler product advertisements, female images tend to dominate.

Persuasive advertising is a distinctive form of mass media, wherein, on the one hand, it helps individuals recognize and understand various social categories, guiding their identification, comprehension, and identification with different social group members' images (Allen et al., 2018). On the other hand, the commercial foundation of mass media...
empowers it with the function of constructing images or patterns, often internalized as social expectations by the audience, thereby influencing their perceptions and behaviors (Lindsey, 2020). Mass media has become a crucial tool for reflecting and shaping gender stereotypes, making the phenomenon of gender stereotyping in media an important topic. Hence, understanding the current state and trends of gender stereotypes used in advertising is meaningful.

This study focuses on analyzing cover advertisements of infant and toddler products, encompassing diverse product categories and themes to ensure their representativeness. A total of 61 randomly collected cover advertisements of infant and toddler products will be analyzed using the visual content analysis method. In conclusion, this study aims to determine the extent to which infant and toddler advertisements reflect or defy traditional gender stereotypes and understand the current state of using gender stereotypes in advertisements.

2. Literature Review

Courtney and Whipple (1974) found through their research that women are more often portrayed in domestic settings and rarely in professional settings in advertisements. They are consistently depicted with high levels of dependency. On the other hand, men are frequently associated with authority and are more likely to be shown in professional environments.

In a study analyzing gender role portrayals in advertisements across Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom, Furnham and Mak (1999) discovered commonalities among the three countries. Men appeared more frequently than women, displayed greater authority, and were perceived to possess more knowledge and power than women. Additionally, products endorsed by women were often low-priced.

Furnham and Voli (1989) analyzed television advertisements in Italy and found that men often initiated the closing remarks, while women were more likely to endorse food and personal care products. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to endorse electronics and sports-related products.

Plakoyiannakina (2008) provided evidence of gender role portrayals in online global product advertisements and examined how women were depicted on web pages targeting different audience types. The results indicated that women often appeared in roles characterized by dependency. Overall, "traditional" or "decorative" gender stereotypes were prevalent in the portrayal of women.

Hesselbarth found that even when advertising creators deliberately presented counter-stereotypical messages by switching gender roles, advertisements still reinforced gender stereotypes. Traditional stereotypes were reflected in various details of the advertising production process. For instance, men were always portrayed as taller than women, and even when performing household chores, they were portrayed as being clumsy in taking care of children or doing household tasks. Conversely, even when women became managers, they were shown worrying about their children during working hours. When gender roles were swapped, the stereotypes persisted in the presentation, indicating that gender stereotypes exist not only in different positions, roles, and divisions of labor but also in every small detail of the images created in advertisements.

Wang (2009) found that mass media has long been regarded as a "social institution or sphere" wherein media discourse conveys the ideology of these institutions' members, and media content is seen as a reflection of society. Male and female representations in advertisements differ significantly in terms of the endorsed product categories, product prices, information provision, and personal images. Women are often spokespersons for body or household products, while men are more likely to endorse high-tech or electronic products. In terms of product prices, advertisements featuring men usually promote higher-priced items. Men are associated with scientific information, while women are associated with subjective information. Men are portrayed as shrewd and authoritative. As a result, consumers automatically associate male spokespersons with male products and female spokespersons with female products, conforming to the traditional gender stereotypes in advertisements.

Academic discussions on gender stereotypes in advertising have been ongoing for over four decades, with early research primarily focusing on female stereotypes and male stereotypes. In recent years, as women have gained greater independence and experienced changes in social status, the research focus has shifted towards the portrayal of women in advertisements. However, most studies have focused on video advertisements and have not extensively explored specific types of advertisements. In this study, the main focus will be on analyzing advertisements found on the covers of infant and toddler products to examine the presence of gender stereotypes in these advertisements.

3. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the presence of gender stereotypes in infant product cover advertisements.
The study will draw upon the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) developed by Bem (1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) developed by Spence and Helmreich (1978) to assess the relationship between infant product cover advertisements and gender stereotypes in terms of personality traits (such as gentleness and aloofness) and physical appearance (including age, posture, and clothing).

Furthermore, advertisements employ unique narrative techniques that continuously create consumer desires, resulting in individuals being in a perpetual "buying mood" (Lizardi, 2014). Advertisements also adapt to changing consumer preferences in order to attract a broader audience. Considering the potential transformation of traditional gender stereotypes, this study aims to explore whether contemporary mother and baby advertisements have undergone changes. Therefore, the following research questions will be addressed:

1) What are the most prevalent types of character portrayals in infant product cover advertisements?
2) Do infant product cover advertisements reflect or defy gender stereotypes?
3) How do infant product cover advertisements shape the image of mothers?

4. Method

4.1 Sampling

This study will conduct a content analysis of the research sample to examine the relationship between infant product cover advertisements and gender stereotypes. The researchers will employ the method of photo-documentation to sample and collect photographs. Photo-documentation is a valuable method for gathering data and preserving visual information (Rose, 2001). Therefore, collecting advertisements from mother and baby product covers through this method will facilitate the analysis of gender stereotypes in this type of advertising.

Based on the research objectives and questions of this study, the researchers will primarily collect cover advertisements of various types of infant products, excluding poster advertisements. The term "infant products" in this study refers to products specifically designed and manufactured to meet the needs of infants and young children, typically aged between 0 and 3 years. These products include but are not limited to baby supplies, toys, food, clothing, bedding, safety equipment, and healthcare products.

In May 2023, the researchers spent one week randomly photographing infant product cover advertisements in ten different types of stores located in Sheffield (ALDI, Sling·Spot, Poundland, The Entertainer, Bodycare, Sainsbury's, Boots, Marks & Spencer, Lidl, and Tkmax). To ensure the rigor of the study, all collected images were subjected to a second screening, resulting in a final selection of 65 photographs that met the requirements of this study's image sample (N=65).

4.2 Image Encoding Classification

Bell (2001) suggests that codes should be altered, added, or collapsed in order to ensure that all sampled texts are categorized and that the codes are "mutually exclusive and exhaustive." Therefore, the design of coding categories is based on the research content and image features. In addition, the design of coding categories also draws on existing gender stereotype scales. This study draws upon the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) developed by Bem (1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) developed by Spence and Helmreich (1978). Four primary markers were ultimately determined for coding. These markers are gender, clothing, image, and temperament.

4.3 Ethical Concerns

All research that uses visual elements should think about its ethics. According to Rose (2012), key issues in visual research include maintaining the confidentiality, anonymity, and consent of research participants, as well as addressing copyright issues related to images. Sample collection takes place in public areas, and precautions are taken to avoid capturing the faces of other individuals during the photographs. Additionally, copyright issues regarding advertisements are also considered. When studying these infant and toddler product cover ads, the copyright of the advertisements will be protected, ensuring that they are not used for any other commercial purposes and are solely for research use. Throughout the entire research process and after its completion, only the researchers and supervising faculty will have access to these photographs, and they will not be publicly disclosed.
5. Findings and Discussion

A total of 61 infant and toddler product cover advertisements were coded and analyzed in this study. To investigate the predominant character portrayals in mother-infant advertisements and examine the presence of gender stereotypes in infant and toddler product cover ads, the gender of adult characters depicted in the advertisements was primarily coded. It is important to note that during the coding process, all infant characters depicted in the ads were considered to have an indeterminate gender.

5.1 Gender

Table 1. Total number of images featuring gender N(n%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Total number of images featuring gender N(n%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Images containing only females</td>
<td>41(67.21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images containing only males.</td>
<td>5(8.20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images containing both males and females</td>
<td>7(11.48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images with unspecified gender of the individuals</td>
<td>8(13.11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequent depiction in infant and toddler product cover advertisements is that of a mother and child, with a sample count of 41, accounting for 67.21% of the total. Female characters still dominate in these advertisements. The occurrence of a father with a child in infant and toddler product cover ads is 5 times, representing 8.20%. These ads predominantly feature “newborn carriers”. The sample count for ads featuring the presence of both the father, mother, and child is 7, accounting for 11.48%. Further analysis reveals that the product category with a higher occurrence of up to three individuals is baby bottle advertisements, typically portraying a warm household scene with the mother, child, and father together.

5.2 Clothing

Table 2. Total number of images featuring clothing N(n%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total number of images featuring clothing N(n%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing Colors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light colors</td>
<td>43(70.49%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark colors</td>
<td>8(13.11%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other colors</td>
<td>10(16.40%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual Clothing</td>
<td>44(72.13%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Clothing</td>
<td>1(1.64%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous or Undefined Style Clothing</td>
<td>16(26.23%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the collected samples, the majority of characters appearing in the advertisements are dressed in light-colored clothing, with a total occurrence of 43 times, accounting for 70.49%. Light colors can create a softer and more appealing image, which aligns with the psychological needs of the target audience for infant and toddler products. In terms of clothing style, characters wearing casual attire appear in 44 instances in all the received ads, representing nearly three-quarters of the total sample. Most characters are dressed in light-colored clothing, creating a warm and harmonious atmosphere. However, it is noteworthy that the only character with relatively formal attire is a man wearing a polo shirt. This aligns with traditional gender stereotypes regarding the personality traits of men.
The coding classification was based on the characterization of individuals in the collected advertisement samples. The category with the highest frequency is "Joyful", appearing 28 times, accounting for 45.90% of the occurrences. Most of the advertisements depict scenes where mothers are smiling and interacting with their children. The second category is "Gentle", appearing 14 times, accounting for 22.95%. Again, the majority of these instances feature mothers. It is worth noting that the category "Cold" only appears once, represented by a slightly serious-looking father. This exemplifies traditional gender stereotypes, where warmth is often associated with feminine traits. Conversely, masculine traits are commonly associated with strength and authority.

6. Conclusion

Through the investigation, it is evident that there are still clear gender stereotypes present in infant product cover advertisements. The most common portrayal in these advertisements is still that of a mother, as the primary caregiver for children is often attributed to women. Kim and Lowry (2005) conducted research in the United States and other countries, which demonstrated that men are expected to have more involvement in work outside the home rather than in child-rearing, as depicted in advertisements.

The gender of the main characters in infant product cover advertisements can reveal the relationship between gender and childcare, as well as the relationship between gender and household chores. The research results indicate that the proportion of women appearing as caregivers in infant product cover advertisements is significantly higher than that of men. Therefore, gender stereotypes continue to be a prevalent phenomenon in these advertisements. This also confirms the conclusions of Coltrane and Adams (1997), who suggested that the underlying reason for traditional gender stereotypes may be the differences in temperament between men and women. Traits such as strength, independence, confidence, success, and assertiveness are typically associated with male characteristics, while traits such as gentleness, kindness, domesticity, and beauty are commonly associated with female characteristics.

Furthermore, the research also reveals the presence of a small number of male characters in infant product advertisements, which can be seen as a challenge to traditional gender stereotypes. In recent years, with the progress and openness of society, women's awareness has gradually awakened, and their social status and influence have increased (Zhang, 2022). The social identity of women is being redefined, with both its connotation and extension continuously expanding. Traditional female stereotypes in advertisements are being broken and deconstructed, giving rise to the emergence of the so-called "new female image" (Xu, 2022). These new female images exhibit individuality while still embodying the nurturing essence of women. This study also reflects the current trend of gender roles becoming more blended in society. It is predicted that female images in television advertisements will become more diversified in terms of professions, three-dimensional representations, and positioning.

In addition, as a special mass communication medium, advertising plays a significant role in product promotion and sales. Mothers, especially in household shopping and infant product consumption, have a decisive role, which has led to the normalization of portraying mothers in infant product advertisements. Therefore, this depiction has a certain universality.

Regarding the portrayal of mothers in infant product advertisements, young women are predominantly featured. The gentle mother figure symbolizes the mainstream image in these advertisements. From the portrayal of mothers
In infant product advertisements, it is evident that gender stereotypes still persist.

7. Limitations

This study was conducted by a single researcher with limited time and resources. Therefore, the sample collection was limited to some well-known chain supermarkets and stores in Sheffield city center. The sample collection locations and sample size were both restricted. Given sufficient personnel and time, expanding the sample collection range and including poster advertisements within the scope of data collection would be beneficial. With a larger sample size and more diverse samples, cross-analysis may reveal new findings.

In future research, the advertisements can be categorized based on their usage/functionality, followed by a multi-angle comparison and analysis of different types of products, which may lead to new discoveries.

Furthermore, since this study involves coding and categorizing the samples, the subjectivity of the classification process may influence the objective analysis and understanding of the content.

References


