

Female stereotypes in household appliances advertising and their social role in Spain: the perpetuation of a no-longer-existing female condition.

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Abstract

Recently, the issue of mass media, advertising and their influence on the building of our culture and social values has been broadly debated by both academics, from a sociological standpoint, and public entities aimed at regulating media content-especially television.

The following paper¹ contains the results of a qualitative approach on the matter, based on the effect of household appliances commercials in constructing female identity of Spanish women today. Conclusions were drawn based on a juxtaposition of social background and advertising content between the 60's and the past decade, and, most importantly, on how Spanish women of today perceive the evolution of female imagery depicted in advertising from these two periods.

The aim is to demonstrate how much advertising mirrors society and how far it reinforces paradigms no longer existing, through the use of semiotics and symbology which are not always clear to the target audience, who fails to realize such influence of this medium.

Keywords: Gender roles in advertising, TV Advertising in Spain.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Background and theoretical frame. 3. Methodology. 4. Conducting the interviews. 5. Research outcome. Conclusion and final considerations. References.

¹ This Paper is grounded on a Master degree dissertation presented at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona, Spain) and tutored by Prof. Monika Jimenez in September, 2010. In the adaptation of such dissertation, some content was inevitably set aside. However, the Paper intends to extract the most crucial information found during the investigation as well as to put the reader in context to what regards the background of this work. As the author sees the Paper as an academic tool and possible reference to other authors, the bibliography used for the dissertation was chosen to remain intact, even if some references do not appear in the final version.

1. Introduction

«By presenting, in a caricatured way, scenery where the woman must be a 'woman', advertising-a reflector and agent of society, confirms as a fact a 'natural' behavior that is not at all according to the interests of women's world itself» (Herne, 1993: 31). The conclusion made by Claude Herne in 1993, shows clearly the power of advertising in helping society to define specific models of behavior for men and women and submitting the latter to a specific and limited role.

The analysis proposed by Herne does not come out accidentally in the end of the 20th century. With the boom of technology and economic growth in the second half of the century, the western urban woman finds herself on the threshold of her final emancipation from the household. As «advertising does not exist in isolation from the rest of society, it mirrors in some way the 'reality' that surrounds it» (Jhally, 1987: 200), one assumes that advertising from this period on should therefore portray a woman at the peak of her independence, show no judgment of values between genders and propose no specific roles to men and women.

By watching advertisings today, seventeen years after Herne's study, one can easily perceive how the format in which they portray men and women in the private sphere might have changed, but the message at its core seems to remain the same-even though, according to Herne, «this social definition is not perceivable at a first glance» (Herne, 1993: 5).

2. Background and theoretical frame

The issue of a mass-produced stereotypical identity vs. the construction of an individual identity with self-defined critical consciousness (Heidegger ed. 2002) was a constant issue of abstract analysis in different fields within humanities, from Jung's analysis of the existence of archetypes, collective unconscious and their effect on the formation of being, to Eco's work on the «*existence of various codes and sub-codes and the variety of the socio-cultural circumstances in which a message is emitted*» (Eco, 1984: 5).

Over the past few years, there has been an increase on papers and studies which applied these quoted concepts into the study of the female role and its representations in mass-consumption communication pieces. They arrive basically with the establishment of democracy in post-dictatorial countries such as Spain in the last decades of the 20th century, which has allowed the idea of gender parity to take an important role in social and political discussions, as well as to generate action rather than to maintain its previous formal character. However, the gender research issue in Spain, according to a study developed in 2002 by Celia Valiente, tends to be more influenced by the political rather than the social evolution in the country.

«The first steps taken by the Spanish government to foment parity between genders» (Mohammad 2005) and currently one of the most relevant institutions on the matter in Spain is the *Instituto de la Mujer en España* (Women's Institute in

Spain). Created in 1983, it is an autonomous institute which, under the Ministry of Equality, works for «removing the obstacles so they (women) can be a part of culture, work, political and social life».²

A recent report emitted by the *Instituto* considered the «*Female Image in (visual) Advertising and Communication*» in 2008 and aimed at pointing out commercials or TV programs which depicted women in a negative way, in which one of the conclusions was: «The woman appears now as a mother, housewife and working out of the house, even if the predominant connection to the private sphere and the house is still strong» and «the elements which propose transgression of stereotypes seem unnatural» (Instituto de la Mujer, 2008: 9). The Instituto received 317 complaints from viewers in 2008, 18.6% of which regarded household stereotypes.

Parallel to public reports and leveraging on the relevance they give to the subject, academic work has also been developed in the field. Some recent studies have recognized that advertising sells the idea of a new concept of «co-responsibility», that is, a more balanced presence of men in the house and women in the public sphere, which is the case of the study done by Maria Elósegui in 1998: «Los Roles de la Mujer y el Varón en la Sociedad Española y su Reflejo en los Anuncios de Televisión» («The roles of men and women in Spanish society and their reflections on TV commercials»). However, even recognizing some changes in the female image portrayed in advertising, studies acknowledge there are still others to be made, and none can actually conclude that advertising and media do not provide at all a biased gender-oriented viewpoint.

Another interesting study on the theme was conducted by Federico Valls-Fernández and José Manuel Martínez-Vicente, entitled «*Gender stereotypes in Spanish Television Commercials*». They state the importance of analyzing media content—and advertising in particular, as they are «a reflection of society and therefore, of prevailing cultural values» (Valls-Fernandez, Martínez-Vicente, 2007: 691). They also quote the work of J.P Murray in sustaining that «television and television advertising are confirmed to be one of the main agents of socialization [...] and are means by which children learn about «appropriate» gender behaviors and roles» (Valls-Fernandez, Martínez-Vicente, 2007: 691). This concept also relates to archeologist Lambros Malafouris' idea that children get engaged to culture through its artifacts (television being today definitely one of the main artifacts of culture dissemination), so that culture is created by us just as we are created by culture (Malafouris 2004).

² This is one of the many public organizations which analyze and/or control gender-oriented issues in Spain. There are many others institutions which see to regulate the issue specifically in the media, to quote: *Asociación para la Autorregulación de la Comunicación Comercial-Autocontrol* (Self-regulation of the Communication Community Association) and *Consejos Audiovisuales* (Audiovisual Councils) in Andalucía -CAA; Islas Baleares-CAIB; Navarra-CoAN; and Catalunya-CAC. Also to quote, two other relevant entities in Europe: The Advertising Standards Authority-ASA, in UK and The European Advertising Standards Alliance-EASA.

Fernandez and Martínez also touch a crucial point, which is the core of this study, when describing results of research in gender stereotypes in the past few years, as «these representations [gender stereotypes] have not changed much over the last 25 years, although a few attributes are presented in a more balanced fashion. The general opinion is that sexism or gender stereotyping in television advertising continues, although portrayals of women in advertising are becoming more realistic» (Valls-Fernandez, Martínez-Vicente, 2007: 692).

The paper intends to, grounding on previous studies on the theme, depict a fresh vision on advertising's effect in psico/social values construction, based on :

- i) an outsider look on the role that commercials play in Spanish society,³ which is tangent to an unbiased perspective and favors a broader source of bibliographic resources;
- ii) a deeper dive in some specific aspects of gender-oriented commercials, such as misperceptions of the audience to a veiled message contained in them —elements overlooked by the observer, thus more likely to being 'dangerously' absorbed as reality.
- iii) a new intersection between the historical context in Spain and its effect on the construction of advertising content in correlation with psycho-social effects of mass media advertising and consumption.

3. *Methodology*

The first step was to determine how the difference between women's role in society, politics and economy vs. the image presented in commercials could be made clear. In order to do so, a comparison was made between female participation in these public spheres fifty years ago and now, followed by an analysis of commercials from that period and from today.

The reason why the 60's was the decade chosen to be compared with the present time is that there was a specially remarkable female oppression in that period in Spain under Franco's Dictatorship, which was translated both as legislation and timid female participation in the public space (as society was openly patriarchal and government favored traditional family structures), besides extreme sexist concepts in commercials.

Both quantitative and qualitative data on women's (active and passive) presence in politics and in economy (their presence in the work space, the number of housebound women, number of women holding public office, etc.) were considered, as well as a qualitative approach to women's rights regarding legislation and an analysis of their role in social life. This information was collected from other academic works and from public data sources, such as public reports. The evolution of the female participation in Spanish society observed in these period was remarkable, both from a quantitative (representation of women in the work force or number of women in politics) and a qualitative (women being recognized by legislation in parity to men, for instance) point of view.

³ Given that the author has a personal and academic background outside of Spain.

The next step was the choice of advertising material to be used in the research. A number of commercials were selected based on their reflection of the issue in question: men and women and their relation to the household and the family. These commercials did not always show a woman *using* a household appliance or product, but are necessarily related to house appliances or products and the family. The criteria to select the commercials aimed at creating a set of different situations and settings within the household ambit, in order to enable a wider range of discussion between the groups. The group of commercials should, in the end, contain: female/male interaction with household care; sole female participation in house care; women's presence as something evoked rather than necessarily physical; settings inside and outside the house.

These commercials would be presented to women (whose profiles will be better explained in «Conducting the interviews») in the form of focus groups, as 6 advertisements from the 60's and 6 advertisements from the past decade were considered adequate to provide a sufficient amount of material for discussion while, at the same time, keeping women engaged and interested. It was important to have a small number of advertisements, as showing the commercials could not take too long, for repeated images and concepts could influence the women's perception and thus distort the result of the research. As they all concerned the same theme, that number would be sufficient.

After that, an analysis of content was developed,⁴ based on a semiotic and sociologic bibliography. At this point, elements regarding gender treatment were pointed out (most of them much clearer in the 60's advertisements) in order to specify some almost unperceived gender elements in images or discourse.

The importance of such an interpretation is reinforced by Judith Williamson in «*Decoding Advertising*», where she defines advertisements as an assemblage of signs that convey a specific meaning, designed to sell products and create a consumerism ideology (Williamson 1978). Nevertheless, advertising signs should not be seen only with a «meaning in themselves» as, «a sign consists of two elements, the signifier (the material object, word, or picture) and the signified (the meaning ascribed to the material object, word or picture). Hence the structuralist slogan: a sign is always thing-plus-meaning» (Ball, Smith, 1992: 48).

The chosen advertisings were:

From the past decade: Skip detergent; Kalia Vanish Oxi Action Multi; Fairy Cleansing and Care, Fairy cold water dishwasher, Bold easy ironing, Ala detergent.

From the 60's: Cognac Soberano, Financer Fiseat, Bimbollo Bread, Aspes Appliances, Ruton Polisher and Vacuum Cleaner, Corcho Kitchen.

Some hypotheses were raised as a result of the analysis of the advertising material and the social, political and economic approach comparing women's role

⁴ In order to adapt the format of the dissertation into this paper, the advertisements content analysis are not included, but are, most definitely, reflected on the conclusions, as they helped building the critical overview from the author as the investigation was being conducted.

regarding household in the 60's and today. When considering these hypotheses, the need to conduct a qualitative research in order to obtain the desired type of data and achieve the objective of this project became clear. More specifically, the dissertation was driven towards a constructive or naturalistic investigation, which sought to «understand the constructions of reality created by the people being studied and by the researcher through a circle of inquiry» (Morgan, 1993: 139).

Focus groups seemed an appropriate technique to conduct such a research because they provide not only «qualitative data to answer research questions» (Morgan, 1993: 11), but also «insights into the formation of views which cannot be so readily achieved via individual interviews» (Somekh, Lewin, 2005: 42). Moreover, a specific nuance of this type of inquiry is that results can be enriched by observing not only how women relate to their own identity regarding gender roles, but also how they perceive their identity among peers. Thus, focus groups «often give facilitators the chance to observe how individuals within groups react to the views of others and seek to defend their own views» (Somekh, Lewin, 2005: 42).

The results of the questionnaire were divided according to the theme proposed by each set of questions:

- i) Identification with the protagonist and the situation in the advertisements;
- ii) Perspective of the men/women relation;
- iii) Identification of gender-oriented signs.

The hypotheses formulated led towards a reflection concerning the economic and political data which give an account of female changes in the social sphere from fifty years ago until today, as well as the women's view on the commercials presented. New insights generated in the course of the research and fresh perspectives not foreseen in the initial hypotheses helped forming a broader view of this investigation, which is expressed in the conclusion.

4. Conducting the interviews

The interviews were conducted with 5 groups of women, each composed by 3 to 5 women, in a total of 18 women. They were aged between 28 and 40; middle class; single or in a stable relationship; all of them living in urban areas (and currently living in Barcelona, State of Catalonia); and having used similar products to those advertised.

In order to guarantee a resemblance in their lifestyle regarding career-focused vs. housewife, the filter of this research was whether they had worked or were currently working out of home in the past two years.

A guide with questions was formulated in order to guarantee that the answers would provide the desired data content according to the hypotheses raised, but also leaving some space for insights and to enable unexpected information and reflections to arise.

First, the group received some simple orientation on how the work would be conducted. They were informed that some household appliances advertisements would

be shown and they would have to answer a few questions. At no point was the final purpose of the enquiry mentioned, so as to avoid influencing the discussion.

The women would watch the first range of advertisements, the «modern» ones, and answer questions related to them. The chronological order of the advertisements was inverted due to the fact that the 60's commercials had more obvious signs of sexism, which could affect their perception of the modern ones. The order of the questions after each set of advertisements was also chosen in such a way that they would not influence the direction of the discussion, aiming at providing realistic answers as far as possible.

Next, they were presented the 60's set of advertisements and other questions were asked. The first set of questions was more relevant to the core of this project, but the second set was necessary to confirm some presumably more obvious hypotheses. In all the groups, interviewees seemed interested in the theme and discussions soon arose, especially regarding comparisons such as «In my family it is not like this».

The questionnaire was developed especially to avoid misleading information related to spontaneous speech. It allowed the enquiry to take an informal approach, enabling a situation where the interviewees reformulated the questions themselves, according to personal background and beliefs. This form of dialogue was needed to reach realistic and palpable insights, as it allowed a more reciprocal structure, which enables personal and projective dialog (Ferrando, Ibañez, Alvira 2002). In other words, the result was both a rational, realistic discourse based on a personal view and experience, and a more subjective, abstract discourse, based on unconscious beliefs and collective patterns of behavior.

Considering that the groups interviewed were composed only by women, some female discourse analysis was carried out before starting the research, in order to get the best from the interviews. One important source of data on female discourse characteristics was the work of anthropologist John Gumperz. According to him, «in friendly talk, women are negotiating and expressing a relationship, one that should be in the form of support and closeness, but which may also involve criticism and distance» (Gumperz, 1982: 209). An important point to be considered was the fact that women seem to be more influenced by others in this type of enquiry than men, as they «explicitly acknowledge and respond to what has been said by others and [...] attempt to link their utterance to the one preceding it by building on the previous utterance or talking about something parallel or related to it» (Gumperz, 1982: 210).

5. Research outcome

The results of the survey applied to the eighteen women are presented below according to the 3 pre-mentioned ambits, followed by excerpts of comments, perceptions from the moderator and discourse analysis.

An adjective to sum up the opinions expressed in the discussions would be «contradictory». Very often, women confused real life situations or perceptions with their personal ideology—which sometimes was expressed as if it were «the ideology to follow». All of them wanted to express how they do not feel like

housewives as they used words such as «ridiculous» or «I do not relate at all», only to tell later on how they did most of the house tasks themselves or how it was exactly the same at their homes.

a) Identification with the protagonist/situation in the advertisements

Most women did recognize the situations of today's advertisements (cleaning dishes, washing clothes) as something related to their daily lives, but thought that the way these activities were represented was exaggerated; thus, it did not provide a perfect reflection of their everyday lives. There was no one who disagreed entirely that the situations somehow represented part of their routine. There was no complete rejection towards the first advertisements presented regarding identification, nor an immediate reaction such as laughter or signs of feeling offended. The reaction was quite the opposite in relation to the second group of advertisements. Women seemed shocked or would laugh thinking they were too absurd.

There was a difference between some of the groups regarding their position towards the «identification» questions: a few of them interpreted the questions more literally and started talking about gender issues only in the middle of the discussion, while others answered with a defensive, «feminist» approach from the beginning. In relation to this matter, some of the answers were «Yes, every day I have to wash dishes and I do care that my hands do not get damaged»; or: «Yes, there is no way out, we have to clean».

Others replied, «Well, not really [I do not identify myself with the situation]. I'm not a housewife, I do not really care about cleaning products»; or «Yes [I do identify myself with the situation], and this is very sexist. Cleaning is actually a concern of our [female] daily life».

Even women who felt somehow related to the products (and to household chores) pointed out that the commercials seemed actually «a bit ridiculous, [due to] the importance they give to these tasks. These are daily situations but they are not such a big deal. I do not really care about stains».

Another interesting comment was: «But, I don't know, the concept that I have of washing dishes is quite different from these women's ideas. I don't think they are related to my mother's time, let alone to my own. I do not imagine my mother washing dishes as my father simply passes by and grabs a towel. So I do identify with cleaning, but not with the context». The same interviewee, later on in the discussion, gave an account of how her father finishes dinner, simply leaves his dish on the table, and goes to watch television (which, to her, is «ridiculous, washing dishes is an individual task, it should not be divided between men or women»). These sorts of statements relate to the contradiction mentioned above, in the same person's or the same group's answers: ideology vs. behavior was something quite relevant in all the groups.

Generally, there was a pattern of stages in which women displayed this ideology compared to what happened in real life, as can be seen in Model 1. First, they showed a really clear viewpoint that they do not want to be seen as «housewives», as this is «not acceptable», seen as a negative characteristic. «Yes, cleaning is a

necessity, but I see it as something to be shared, not an exclusive female responsibility».

Then, they would talk about friends or relatives who did act in the way the commercials presented, still using negative adjectives or showing some kind of complacency towards these people as though trying to say «I know people who are like this, but not me!»: «I have a friend who does buy gloves to wash dishes, because she cares about her hands»; «My sister just got married and she thinks it's the most incredible thing in the world to have a husband that helps in the house. But she leaves to work before him and gets home later, so for me it's just normal that he should help her», or: «To me it's not like that (women staying at home while men leave to work). Some of my friends have this idea of being housewives, 'I take care of the house while my husband works and supports me'. So, to many people it is like that, but not to me». From this standpoint, they would then conclude: «Yes, I believe that, after all, the image of women at home, taking care of the clothes and the kids, is still quite related to real-life women».

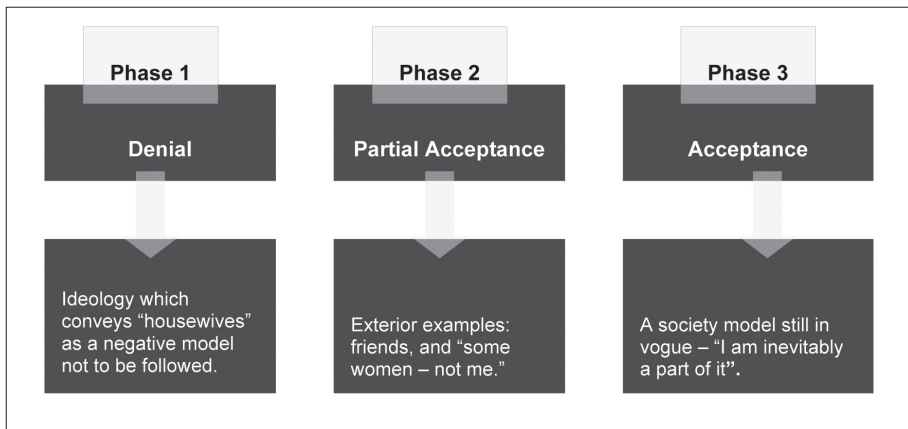
And finally, without seeming to notice it, they would talk about their personal experience and mention how it works at home with their partners, which was quite related to what was shown in the advertisements —and precisely to what they did not want to be related to: «I live with a [male] flat mate who never puts out the trash, so I have to do it» (from the same woman who mentioned that her friends want to be housewives, but she «does not conceive of it»); «I think women try to change this [occupying themselves exclusively with the house], they try to share things more, I mean, talking about me and people I know, but I still see myself in this role, even though I don't want to». In between these lines, there were some contradictory statements, such as: «Society has evolved a lot. Before, women had an inferior position. Today, I do not see this difference so clear (there are not many economic, social, political differences, I mean, see Germany, for instance» (referring to Chief of State Angela Merkel).

But the conclusion was always generalized in the words: «I believe society still sees women like this [a housewife]»: however they almost never formalized the idea that they were a part of this society. All of them showed an ideology of change, but considered society, and non-explicitly themselves, a product of a general image of women. The cause always seemed to be something far beyond their power limits.

One curious comment diverged from this pattern, as a woman mentioned: «I spend my whole life trying not to be like this». However, she also sees it as something a bit out of her control, and she continues: «But in the end, I guess that women have a role that is like that».

An important observation regarding the 60's advertisements is that none of the women felt at any level identified with the images presented, and all of them defined those women with negative phrases such as: «She's almost an object», «She's his servant», «She's stupid, he hits her and it's her fault!?!», «I feel sorry for her. I want *to say: wake up!*». Some of them even laughed when asked if they could relate themselves to those women: «*No! Of course not!*». Just one woman mentioned that she related herself to the *Bimbollo* advertisement because her father never prepared her school lunch and she thought she would do it for her kids.

Model 1.



Source: Elaborated from data of this study.

However, when the discussion was further encouraged after the second set of advertisements, women little by little began to recognize some resemblances between the women in the first and those in the second sets of commercials: «Well, they [commercials today] still show the same hierarchy. It is an evolution of dependence.»; «Yes, there is more technology to help you, but it is still the woman who has to do it»; «It is the same thing, but it's less obvious today»; «They still show a service relationship»; «The one in which the man hits the woman does not relate, it's too silly, but the others, yes [referring to today's commercials]».

Another relevant insight concerns how advertising has helped women reflect on the female role today, but has also built the image of women from the 60's. In a group, when asked if they thought that the women in the second set of advertisements reflected the image of women of that time in general, one of them answered: «Well, you could say so, I mean, I didn't live in that period, but from what people tell me it was like that. Besides, the advertising is like that because this is how it was». In the same group, other comments built on this woman's statement: «I think women [from the commercials] feel ok with this position. They don't seem to question what they have to do, they feel good about it». Another assumption was: «Well, I mean, women in the 60's didn't think the way we think today. They saw these commercials and felt identified with them».

In another group, this matter also took a different direction as some of the women mentioned: «I think things were a bit like that, but it's exaggerated. Commercials always exaggerate. But it's funny, because if women look at these commercials [of today] a few years from now they will think we were like that!!»

b) Perspective of the men/women relation

Generally, all women thought that the men/women relation in the «modern» commercials represented (on different levels to different women) the real form

of relationship between men and women regarding house care today. Not one seemed to be appalled by the images or consider them completely far from reality. At this point of the discussion, practically all the groups were already more involved in the gender topic, rather than took questions as a practical issue —ideology and sociological views dominated this stage of the discussion.

«We are still living a sexist reminiscence. Advertising should sell what we want, parity. It would be taking the lead in the transition we're leaving now, but it is still stuck in a concept of 40 years ago». This statement was quite an insight on how these women, even though they do not seem to feel much bothered or outraged at a first look, do feel that advertising is part of our culture and should represent the evolution of sociological perspectives, as a great influence on collective imagery.

Almost all the women referred to previous generations —and the collective imagery of women and household care— at this point, either to compare them with the evolution of the female role today, or to state that current relations are actually quite similar to those of their parents'/grandparents' generation: «I don't really relate [to male/female relation in the «modern» advertisements]. I think that in some parts of the world there are women like that, but the tendency is to decrease [the number of women who are like that]. These commercials relate to the old model». Others recognized an evolution in the female role: «But there is a great generation gap between my parents and me. So, even if society does influence a lot, I don't see such a strong discrimination today».

It was also mentioned that there is still a great influence of previous generations on the male behavior toward household chores, as they are used to following the model they had when growing up: «Well, I think it is also related to education. My father is fifty years old and can't wash his own clothes; my grandmother does it for him»; «It is always the mothers' fault. Usually mothers ask for their daughters to help them do the chores, not the sons. I see boys who help, do grocery because their mothers taught them to, while others don't care, they leave everything dirty because no one ever told them differently»; «I have a friend who was talking about this. In her husband's house, where there are only boys, the mother always asked them for help, so now he is used to doing it in his own house».

Women talked about how there are still some big gender differences regarding household care, saying more often «some people think» than «I believe»: «It's not considered anything special for the woman to work at home while the man works out, whereas if the man does something in the house he provokes admiration, there are [magazine] articles that say: look how he's fantastic, he lost his job and now he's working in the house. But there are articles on this because it's an exception»; «This [taking care of the house] is still a woman's job, it's a gift to have a man who does it».

Between ideology and practical life, the contradictory behavior can be also translated into «confusion», based on the idea that «we are still living a sexist reminiscence». It seemed clear to all of them how things should work (they were all in favor of parity and sharing the house chores), but they were a bit confused by the image that «society» built on the matter: «We are from a younger generation and we're all independent, we work, we've lived abroad. But we still think

sometimes 'Ah, that's nice, he's cleaning', the idea is still inside us, we know that it is not meant to be like that but it's inevitable to think like that sometimes», or: «At least today we pretend we don't live like that [with gender differences]».

Besides, a frequent idea regarded the existence of actual differences between men and women, which many times justified the image presented in the advertisements. First of all, some women mentioned economic disparity: «Women still earn less money. So they can work for the same period of time, but, I don't know, there's still a tradition that women do it [house chores] and there's also the feeling of guilt that they put less money in the house». They also mentioned taking care of the house and the family as a natural female characteristic: «I think that women are naturally predisposed to do some things and men to do others, just for being born like that»; «I think that women naturally take care of the others».

c) Identification of gender-oriented signs and women's reflection upon it

With no exception, gender-oriented signs were more easily recognized in the commercials from the 60's. Immediately after the women watched them, comments related to sexism started to pop up, which did not happen after the display of the «modern» advertisements.

Some of the comments were: «This is ridiculous; she only has a car because her husband bought it for her!»; «It was the mother who prepared the snack for the child —when she's not the mother, she's the teacher»; «[The woman] is domestic. Her appliances define her status».

However, after some minutes of discussion, women began to notice and comment on sexist elements in «modern» advertisements as well. A curious observation was: «But we are only noticing this because this is a study. If we're watching this ad at our house on a Sunday afternoon it's going to pass by without being noticed». They started to discuss how there was only the female figure in the modern advertisements as «Men don't even appear, only to get a clean towel»; «Men are practically inexistent [in modern advertisements]. I don't like his face expression in the Fairy ad. The woman can't even argue with him. It's silly»; «Women's activities are always based on men's activities [in modern advertisements]».

As the discussion developed, women started pointing out more specific elements in the modern advertisements which incited a gender orientation. As some of them began to discuss it, others felt stimulated to think and talk more about the subject. Actually one of them had an insight which everyone agreed with and admitted not having noticed: «You know, when I think about it, in two advertisements women are washing the clothes and men are washing themselves. He's concerned with his looks and she's worried about the house, the kids». Another woman then replied: «Yes, it's true! And in the ad where she's taking the clothes out of the washing machine, they are not even her clothes, it's just men's shirts.»

Another related comment was: «What about this ad, where the woman is washing the dishes and the man simply turns the water tap? He doesn't even speak to her, it's humiliating». Upon this, there was a quite illuminating comment, related to women's image depicted in the 60's advertisements, as they seemed to be comfortable in the housewife position: «But, you know, they camouflaged the scene.

Because it's not bad, everything is so natural, he enters with a nice face and the woman goes on cleaning, just happy».

When they were asked if they thought advertising was reflecting reality by orienting cleaning advertisements towards women, a few possibilities were raised and, even within the same group, it was one of the issues that seemed to cause higher disagreement. Two groups referred to the fact that maybe commercials were like that because they had been created by men: «Maybe who created this was a man, with a wrong conception of today's world. This man was raised in a really closed family». Another group also mentioned that: «I think it's a late reflection»; «I don't know if I'm trying to be optimistic, but I think there's a delay [in advertisements vs. reality] of commercials of today, maybe it's the same with commercials from the 60's», «It's like they followed an old plot» (referring to today's commercials).

In another group, a woman commented: «I think advertising looks like information [reality] and we start to act like the advertisements, it justifies your actions. Like, it's not something you immediately start imitating, but it's so normal that it is transmitted as reality, it's like if it was like that. It's like [as if the advertisement were saying]: 'I'm not being evil; this is how the world is'. It informs you and influences you».

Differences in discourse construction and in the security that women expressed when exposing their thoughts made it possible to realize this is a theme they are not very familiar with and do not seem to think about much (men's and women's role at home and in society). One of them said: «You never know what came first, the egg or the chicken. Advertisements act according to society: it's how it works, it's how life is, so you identify with the character and you buy it. But it also stimulates a behavior, so you never know who came first. It's like a snow ball».

Regarding the idea that commercials should (or could) be different, there was not full agreement. Some women thought that «There should be a change to break the pattern and make people question these things. It's necessary. It could even be a strategy»; «But this has to change, with feminism and all that. I think it would be efficient to show men doing the cleaning». Others believed it would not be a very good marketing strategy and, thus, did not see so clearly the possibility of change: «Imagine if men saw an ad of a man cleaning the house. They would feel offended. They present things like that just so you know what the product is about. Even if you're not that type of woman, you understand the benefit of the product»; «It's easier to sell it like this».

Conclusion and final considerations

The study has led to the conclusion that commercials, in this case in particular, of household appliances, are a form of perpetuating stereotypes and maintaining paradigms inherent to some economic systems, forming the basis of this system's own existence.

Such a conclusion is made clear with the juxtaposition of the evolution of the female role in Spanish society in the past fifty years and the stability of their status as housewives in commercials over the same period.

Women in Spain have undeniably gained more space and relevance in all spheres (being political, economical and social) as the study shows both through quantitative data —number of women in politics, in the labor market, etc.— and through an empirical investigation which sustains that women today have further aspirations than being necessarily limited to house chores. That is, both practically and ideologically, men and women are reaching parity in the public and private lives.

Commercials, however, seem to depict a more conservative scenario. Household products are clearly targeted at women, as they are shown responsible for all house tasks, even if now more practical and combining it with a working life. This new, «all-in-one woman» package makes them easier to be 'digested' and supports a model with pre-conceived roles, preventing an collective organic evolution to a more equal society from moving at a faster pace (thus meeting the practical and ideological equality which already exists).

The author agrees with public authorities who believe that advertisers should be conscious of the social and cultural impact of their products when creating their discourse, that is not, generally speaking, the case of commercials today. That is precisely because economic forces are much more influential than the awareness of social responsibility —and escaping the convention, in this case, could be economically risky to these advertisers. Yes, maybe advertisements are being based on a reminiscent social belief that —within the scope of this paper— women are bound to be house-oriented, but according to the interviewees, who understand that members of society may still think like that, they do not at all accepted as a correct social behavior which leads to the conclusion that advertising should not perpetuate a negative, limited female image.

However, the author does not by any means believe that advertising has the whole responsibility for the perpetuation of such social models: it is, in fact, only one tool or super-structure that helps moving society towards a certain direction.

The way this situation can change is to have a more rigorous legislation on the subject. At least regarding the female/male issue, laws seem too abstract and open to interpretation, which allows many breaches in the process of diminishing stereotypes in the media. One honestly cannot expect a natural swift in the direction of advertisements regarding social accountability. Therefore, it is up to governments to reinforce that switch. It is also necessary to stimulate female reaction as to seek accountability for this type of content in mass media and in advertisements. They should feel entitled to complain and should realize their own responsibility within the social scope they themselves criticize, in order to provoke their desired changes.

Another key element to take into account while debating the significant role of advertisements today is the lack of other sources of values to learn by. Mass media is the main source of information today —received with increasing credibility— and its content is much more driven by the audience and the consumption it represents than by social accountability. This causes a biased look on some important issues of our society, the gender matter being just one in a thousand.

To conclude, advertising in fact helps (though not being the only agent) perpetuate paradigms in our society —and, as an increasingly powerful tool of social

and cultural construction, the image presented by advertisements tends to be more and more taken as a reflector of reality and mold behaviors and beliefs. A firmer control of possibly stereotyped-contents by specialized entities, a stronger presence of society in the debate of such contents along with a solid, critical education on social matters, such as gender roles would be, therefore, the elements to help creating a more accurate reflection of society by advertisements.

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Annex

a) Skip detergent

Protagonist: Young, modern, romantic woman.

Setting: In home, out of home, laundromat.

Plot: A woman is on her way to a date when her clothes get stained. She sees a laundromat, goes in, takes off her clothes and waits for them to be done in just a few minutes. A voice over says: «Some things are impossible to achieve. But Skip has made it possible». She leaves the laundromat with her clothes feeling satisfied.

b) Kalia Vanish Oxi Action Multi

Protagonist: Middle-age woman, mother of three and responsible for the house care.

Setting: In and out of home. A «TV-breaking-news» aesthetics, atmosphere is a bit chaotic.

Plot: A TV team is doing a report on clothes stains and interviews a woman at her house, asking about how she deals with the problem. The team calls the interviewee and everyone in the neighborhood (all women) to make a stain test nearby-through a huge cleaning structure, they show how the product is effective on stains, so that these women can be «in peace».

c) *Fairy cleansing and care*

Protagonist: Woman who cooks and cleans the house (only her hands can be seen).

Setting: In home

Plot: Sequence of female hands performing daily tasks such as buying groceries, hanging clothes to dry, cleaning a rough surface and peeling a potato. A female voice over says: «Think about what your hands have to go through throughout the day. New Fairy cleansing and care gives you the strength of a Fairy and helps you keep your hands soft and moisturized».

d) *Fairy cold water dishwasher*

Protagonist: Young couple

Setting: In home, at a modern kitchen.

Plot: A young woman is washing dishes as a man's voice singing is heard from the background. Suddenly, he screams as the woman turns the tap to hot water. A male voice over says: Everybody is affected by turning from hot to cold water: everybody but Fairy, because it has twice as much anti-grease strength as any traditional detergent». The man comes out of the shower covered in foam and turns the tap back to cold water. The woman smiles and continues washing the dishes as he goes back to the shower.

e) *Bold easy ironing*

Protagonist: Young couple

Setting: In home, at an all-white modern kitchen.

Plot: A woman is taking the clothes out of the washing machine. As she takes of some shirts and puts them on the table, they naturally fold perfectly, as if they had already been ironed. A man passes by, grabs a towel and says: «I'm going to take a shower», while the woman seems not to notice him and continues her job. A male voice over says: «New Bold Matic: new formula, easy ironing».

f) *Ala detergent*

Protagonist: Children.

Setting: In and out of home, where children are playing.

Plot: A number of children, one after the other say «Perdón, mamá!» (I'm sorry, mummy!), «I got dirty. What did I have in mind? ... I was absent-minded saving animals' lives, learning how to have my own ideas and not be selfish», etc. A pack shot of the product is shown in the end of the commercial, with the lettering: «The stain goes away, the knowledge stays: to get clothes dirty is healthy».

Commercials from the 60's

a) *Cognac Soberano*

Protagonist: Young couple, crystal-ball consultant.

Setting: Crystal-ball consultant's office and young couple's house.

Plot: A woman goes to a crystal-ball consultant to ask for help with a «terrible problem»: her husband's dissatisfaction is causing him to act badly towards her. As the consultant analyzes her problem, images of the woman's daily life appear in the crystal ball: her husband tosses dishes on the ground, yells at her and even seems to hit her. Following the consultant's advice, the woman serves her husband a glass of Cognac Soberano and the couple is happy again.

b) *Financer Fiseat*

Protagonist: Two young women

Setting: Parking lot of a supermarket.

Plot: Two women leave the supermarket when one of them asks the other: «You finally got your husband to buy you a car, eh?». The other answers: «Yes, but only thanks to Fiseat».

c) *Bimbollo Bread*

Protagonist: A primary school teacher and her students.

Setting: Classroom

Plot: In the classroom, a child tries to sneak out a Bimbollo sandwich without letting the teacher notice it. As the child makes some noises in the silent classroom, the teacher, who is writing on the blackboard, turns round to see who is disturbing the class, but eventually the boy gets to eat his *Bimbollo* without being noticed. A voice announces that his mother always chooses *Bimbollo* for lunch, followed by a brief description of the product and the image of a woman packing a sandwich.

d) *Aspes Appliances*

Protagonist: Young woman

Setting: In home

Plot: A housewife shows her different kitchen appliances while briefly describing their basic qualities. First, she approaches a washing machine and states: «This is my washing machine. Beautiful, modern, it never gets tired». As she opens the machine, a parrot comes out saying the name of the brand. Then she approaches the oven and says: «This is my Aspes oven, who speaks for me». A parrot comes out of a pan and again says the name of the brand. A voice over then says: «Aspes works in your house».

e) *Ruton Polisher and Vacuum Cleaner*

Protagonist: Young woman

Setting: In home

Plot: A woman cleans up scenario living-room with her Ruton appliance. As the products are displayed, the woman sings: «My vacuum cleaner/ my polisher/ make the house clean and shinning/ Saved by Ruton/ in 1 minute/ Saved by Ruton». In the last few seconds, a chorus of female voices repeats the jingle and another woman appears, holding a Ruton appliance.

f) *Corcho Kitchen*

Protagonist: Young couple

Setting: In home

Plot: A woman wearing an apron comes out of the kitchen with a dish of cooked meat and serves her husband, who is wearing a tie and suit. Meanwhile, she is thinking of how she hopes he appreciates the food, while his thought concerns «how thrilling it is to think about all the trouble she went to prepare this food». When the man expresses his approval «¡Que bueno te ha salido!» the woman sits down to eat and wonders how many «good moments like this she would enjoy thanks to her kitchen».