

Gender Stereotypes in Media and Advertising and Their Impact on Adolescent Identity Formation

Amy Zhu^{1, a}

¹Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

^a1830763317@qq.com

Abstract

Adolescence is the core stage for individual identity construction, during which media content and commercial advertising can serve as important carriers that influence the socialization process of young people when they are growing up and forming their understanding of the world. Currently, attention to the gender equality is rising. However, mainstream media and advertisements still contain many gender stereotypes, which may affect how adolescents see themselves and also their choices about future goals, and in fact daily behavioral patterns can be influenced by these representations. We use a mixed-methods approach in this study. The participants are adolescents aged 13 to 19 years old. We look at advertising content on both traditional and digital platforms, focusing on gender stereotypes in the content and how they connect to the group's identity construction process, which is expected to reveal the intrinsic connections between media representation and adolescent development. This study uses a sequential design. In the first phase, we completed quantitative content analysis of 200 advertising samples, and at the same time questionnaire data from 400 adolescents were collected so that we can understand the general situation of how they perceive these advertisements. Then, the second phase used qualitative research. It includes focus groups with selected participants and semi-structured interviews. The gender presentation framework from Goffman (1979) is used together with various contemporary media theories, and these form the theoretical basis of this study that can support our analysis of the advertising content and the interpretation of adolescent responses. The study will review prevalent types of gender stereotypes. It will analyze the impact of such content on adolescents' self-awareness and we also look at development goals, while the active negotiation process of these youths regarding such information is explored too so that we can get a full picture. The expected outputs include journal articles and policy briefs. Also, we will develop media literacy toolkits for educators. It is worth noting that existing research still has significant gaps, and this study compares traditional and digital advertising platforms, relying on qualitative methods to highlight adolescent autonomy and this can help fill gaps in existing research.

Keywords

Gender stereotypes, advertising, adolescent identity, mixed methods, media effects.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Adolescent growth has a core task and it is to establish unified and coherent identity [1]. Teenagers at this stage sort through questions such as "Who am I?" and they think about who they want to become in the future. Their self-exploration process is linked to media use and advertising exposure. In fact, this relationship can be observed in daily life. Currently, teenagers spend average 7 to 9 hours a day engaging with various media content. They use TV, social

platforms, streaming services and other digital channels. All these platforms contain advertisements [2].

Advertising has strong cultural influence, and we should note that it is not just for promoting products because it can convey symbolic information related to ideal body shapes and appropriate behavior, and in fact it also includes social roles that people should follow in the society. Gender portrayal in advertising content has attracted academic attention for many years. Current research has reached a consistent conclusion. Women are portrayed as decorative and they show emotions, and family attributes can be emphasized. Men are portrayed as decisive and independent, and they can be reserved [2,3-5].

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Western society now has more awareness about gender inequality, but mainstream media and advertisements still have content about gender stereotypes. This content is usually subtle and hard to detect directly (Ward, 2016). It is worth noting that adolescents are at critical stage of identity formation and if they see this content many times it can impact their growth in many ways. Current research shows that groups exposed to traditional gender stereotypes usually have lower self-esteem and dissatisfaction with their own appearance, Situations with limited career development intentions [7,8]

Current research in this field has many gaps and we can summarize them into four areas. First, we find that most existing research focuses on social context of the West, especially the United States, with little attention to how such action logic operates in other cultural contexts. Second, we observe that existing research examines relatively single dimensions and it involves little intersection of gender with other social identities. In fact, interaction between ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender has not been analyzed. Third, there are differences between advertising and ordinary media content. We note that the specific mechanisms by which ads influence identity construction have not yet been explored in related research and should be examined in future studies. Fourth, platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are expanding in digital advertising, and this situation gives rise to many new content formats and interaction models which traditional content analysis frameworks can hardly cover because they were designed for older media forms and lack the ability to handle such new features.

1.3. Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to investigate the relationship between gender stereotypes in media and advertising and adolescent identity formation. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. What gender stereotypes are prevalent in contemporary advertising targeting adolescents across traditional television and digital platforms?
2. How does exposure to these stereotypical portrayals influence adolescents' self-perception, body image, and future aspirations?
3. How do adolescents actively interpret, resist, negotiate, or internalize stereotypical messages in advertising?
4. What differences exist in the reception and impact of traditional versus digital advertising formats?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

In this study, we refer to the existing theories from different schools. Social cognitive theory [9] is used to explain that people can learn by observing the media images in the daily life and repeated exposure to similar content can reinforce their conventional expectations of gender-

conforming behavior. The inclusion theory [10] suggests that when audiences watch TV with high frequency, they gradually accept the reality constructed by the media. It is worth noting that this can change their ingrained perceptions of social norms. Identity theory [1,11] is used as a framework and it can explain an individual's self-concept and how it develops through social interaction and self-reflection.

We use the active audience perspective in this study. Adolescents are not considered as passive recipients of media information. In fact, teenagers can combine their current identities with peer environment and they refer to peer environment. They rely on critical media literacy. It is worth noting that they interpret the meaning and resist unwanted content. Also they can negotiate with media messages [12-13].

2.2. Gender Stereotypes in Advertising

We should note that Irving Goffman's 1979 book *Gender Advertising* is still the basic material for study gender coding mechanisms in advertising. In fact, in this book he proposed the concept of "gender representation," which is a ritualized expression that simplifies and also amplifies different gender-related features already formed within the cultural system. It is worth noting that after he examined many advertising images, we can see Goffman summarized several common presentation patterns: ritualized portrayals of subordinate status, which often place women in lower body position or use protective gestures; Also, permissive withdrawal can make women show they cannot concentrate well and emotionally detach from the scene; The presentation of female tactile sensation means women touch themselves or the objects around them in a way similar to self-caressing behavior

In 1979, Henry finished reviewing Goffman's research findings and he proposed that such behaviors can fall under category of "extra-ritualized" behaviors which means the interaction process is highlighted and parts are extracted and this leads to perceptions of gender relations. Also, these perceptions are unbalanced and distorted. It is worth noting that contemporary research supports that the proportion of explicit gender discrimination has declined. However, this subtle "display" pattern still exists [15,16]

In digital advertising field, we can see some new stereotype representation forms. It is worth noting that post-feminist ideas from online opinion leaders support individual empowerment. Also, they can strengthen traditional aesthetic standards and consumption habits which we can observe in current digital marketing environment and this phenomenon should be noted by researchers who study consumer behavior in social media context [17,18]. Brand promotion content on Instagram and TikTok uses gendered narrative frameworks for scenarios such as success and intimacy, and also self-presentation which we can see in many posts today and this pattern is common in this field.

2.3. Media Effects on Adolescent Identity

It is worth noting that many studies in different field can show that media exposure has relation to gender development outcomes. Ward (2016), after doing a broad review, proposed that media use behaviors can influence adolescents' cognitive formation of gender, race, sexual orientation and aesthetic standards and it can act on brain and physiological development through two mechanisms: neural priming and reward sensitization

Rivadeneyra and Ward (2016) studied 186 Latino adolescents. Association between TV viewing behavior and gender role attitudes was analyzed and they found that girls who watched TV longer and believed content was more realistic can have more traditional gender role attitudes. It is worth noting that scope of evidence was expanded by this study beyond previous mainly white sample population and this is a good improvement.

Now researchers examine how early adolescents develop. One project uses mixed methods and it surveyed 54 sixth-grade students aged 11 to 12. Most respondents can accept different

gender awareness and they know gender inequality exists in the reality. The conclusion states that the more respondents feel characters in YouTube videos, commercials, video games and movies resemble themselves, the more their views on gender roles can become stereotyped and traditional norms are reinforced. It is worth noting that even teenagers with open gender identity can be affected. Their identity with the media characters supports the traditional gender norms.

In 2015, Lopukhova chose 61 Russian adolescents aged 15 to 17 for an experiment to examine how gender images in commercial ads can affect gender self-awareness, and the study uses a "multiple identification" psychosemantic method for data analysis to process the collected information. Results show that after watching ads with gender stereotypes, the gender classification frameworks and self-identity cognition of participants can be reinforced. The study proposes that the structure of self-awareness is easy to change and can be influenced by external preset images [20]. In fact, when comparing influence degree between two levels, we can find that this effect on emotional level is more obvious than on cognition.

2.4. Advertising and Identity Formation Among Adolescents

Li (2024) has a different view from traditional hypothesis, which suggests that as adolescents' cognitive abilities mature during the growth period, their resistance to advertising can become strong and they should be able to avoid the marketing influence in daily life. But Li surveyed 320 Chinese middle school students and different results are found and it is worth noting that most teenagers show high materialism. Also they have strong need to join peers. And showing individuality is important for them. These factors together create optimal conditions. It can make individuals more susceptible to marketing influences [21]. In fact, the core characteristic of adolescence is a strong internal conflict between the need to integrate into group and to highlight differences at the same time, which causes self-perception to waver and can bring more uncertainty to their identity building process. Also it can increase acceptance of identity-building demands in advertisements.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

We design this research based on some gaps in current studies that receive little attention. First, not many studies compare traditional TV ads and native digital ads, such as TikTok brand content, Instagram Stories, also YouTube pre-roll ads, in same framework. Second, many studies show correlation results but few use mixed methods to find how common stereotypes are and trace how the teenagers understand advertising content. Third, most existing studies focus on outcome variables such as self-esteem and body satisfaction, but mechanism how advertising affects identity formation is not analyzed. Fourth, few studies look at perspective of adolescents and they mostly use quantitative surveys. Also, there is still lack of qualitative exploration about how young people understand and respond to gendered advertising.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design[22], integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches across three phases:

Phase 1 (Quantitative): Content analysis of 200 advertisements to identify prevalent gender stereotypes.

Phase 2 (Quantitative): Survey of 400 adolescents to measure associations between advertising exposure and identity indicators.

Phase 3 (Qualitative): Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with a subset of participants to explore interpretive processes.

This design allows the quantitative phases to establish patterns and associations at scale, while the qualitative phase provides rich, contextualized data on how adolescents actively construct meaning from advertising content.

3.2. Phase 1: Content Analysis

We use intent sampling to choose 200 ads for analysis. Among them, 100 are TV commercials. They all aired during prime time on channels that teenagers like. In fact, content covers reality shows and teen-targeted dramas. The other 100 are digital ads, such as YouTube pre-roll ads, Instagram feed branded content, TikTok sponsored posts and Snapchat ads. We select these from September 2024 to February 2025. It is worth noting that this can ensure the sample meets timeliness required for research.

Coding Framework: The coding scheme integrates Goffman's (1979) gender display categories with contemporary categories developed for digital media.[1] Key coding dimensions include:

Body display (relative size, body positioning, use of space)

Facial expression (smiling, serious, dreamy, assertive)

Function of depicted person (decorative, informational, authoritative)

Setting (domestic, professional, recreational, unspecified)

Voice-over gender (male, female, none, multiple)

Product type (gendered vs. neutral products)

For digital advertisements, additional codes capture interactive features (e.g., calls to comment, share, use branded hashtags), influencer authenticity cues, and algorithmic targeting indicators.

Reliability: Two coders will independently code 20% of the sample, with inter-coder reliability assessed using Cohen's kappa (target $\kappa > .80$).

3.3. Phase 2: Survey

We recruit 400 participants aged 13 to 19 from five middle schools in area. During school selection phase we expand coverage as much as possible. It is worth noting that selected schools can demonstrate sufficient differences in socioeconomic status and ethnic composition, also we consider urban and suburban location.

Measures: The survey will include validated instruments:

Gender role attitudes: The Children's Sex Role Inventory,[23] which measures masculinity and femininity as independent dimensions and has demonstrated reliability with adolescent populations ($\alpha > .80$)

Self-esteem: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.[24] Schmitt and Allik (2005) validated the RSES across 53 nations, finding largely invariant factor structure and supporting its cross-cultural applicability

Body image: The Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015)

Career aspirations: A modified version of the Career Aspiration Scale (O'Brien, 1996)

Advertising exposure: Self-reported frequency of viewing television commercials and digital ads, including platform-specific measures for YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat

Materialism: The Youth Materialism Scale,[27] validated across countries and cultures

Procedure: Following ethics approval and parental consent, surveys will be administered during school hours (or online for remote participants). Completion time is approximately 30 minutes.

3.4. Phase 3: Qualitative Component

Focus Groups: We plan to conduct four focus group interviews. Each group includes 6 to 8 respondents. The groups are stratified by age (divided into 13-15 and 16-19 age ranges) and gender. In interview, we use semi-structured outlines. It is worth noting that the outline can

cover respondents' interpretations of specific advertisements displayed at interview site. Also, their understanding of gender portrayal styles is expected to be examined. Then, reflections on the impact of ads on themselves and their peers can be collected.

We use semi-structured interviews here. Respondents are selected from those who participated in preliminary surveys and all of them express willingness to join follow-up research, with 20 participants in total. It is worth noting that we conduct individual interview with each person and we examine identity narrative content in depth, and we also ask how they can handle relevant media information during the process of their self-awareness development. We describe analysis process here in detail and list the steps. Interview and focus group content is recorded and transcribed into text word by word, and then we use NVivo software for thematic analysis [28], which can help us organize the data and find the patterns in a systematic way so that the reliability can be improved. It is worth noting that the analysis can be divided into six stages. We first familiarize with the data and generate initial encoding, then we sort out the topic and review it. In the last step we determine the topic name and its meaning and the analysis results are formed..

3.5. Ethical Considerations

We clarified four ethical norms before research started. In the informed consent section, for participants under 16, we should get consent from the adolescent and we also need permission from their parents or guardians. It is worth noting that we explain the purpose, process, risks and benefits using words that can match their cognitive level. For confidentiality, the data is anonymized. Reports use pseudonyms. Also the original data is stored on encrypted servers in university and only research team members can access it. Regarding protection mechanisms, if any participant discloses information about their own harm during the interview it should be handled according to university protection procedures and we refer them to a designated protection specialist. In fact, after post-disclosure stage, all participants are given written explanatory materials explaining the core purpose of the research along with access to relevant support resources so they can seek help when having concerns about body image or self-esteem.

3.6. Feasibility

We plan a research project in this paper. It has a duration of 12 months and can be carried out using existing available resources. The AdForum and YouTube API ad databases we use can be accessed through school subscription. We already contacted local school districts and they said that if ethical review passes they can participate in this study. We finished training in qualitative interview methods and SPSS software operation and the instructor has rich experience in blended research method design.

4. Expected Outcomes and Significance

4.1. Expected Findings

Based on the literature reviewed, several findings are anticipated:

1. Prevalence of Stereotypes: Gender stereotypes can be found in the different content platforms, and their forms vary across these platforms, but in principle we can see that they continue traditional gender stereotypes and are not completely removed from public communication field. TV ads follow traditional models. They correspond to categories proposed by Goffman. But in digital ads, similar stereotypes are difficult to detect and they can appear as "female empowerment" which uses labels like #GirlBoss. It is worth noting that the core is still about appearance requirements.
2. Variable-identity correlation characteristics: When exposure to stereotype ads is higher, gender role attitudes can be more traditional. Also, body appreciation level can be lower. This

feature is more obvious among girls, and it is worth noting that strength of this correlation can be moderated by critical media literacy and peer support and the relationship is not fixed so external factors should be considered..

3. Proactive negotiation: Then we look at qualitative data we compiled and it can show there are differences in how the teenagers interpret stereotypes. Some internalize these stereotypes and some resist. It is worth noting that other teenagers take opposing approach based on their existing identity and also the social environment.

4. Platform differences: Digital advertising may exert stronger influence due to personalized targeting, perceived authenticity of influencers, and interactive features that encourage engagement rather than passive viewing.

4.2. Significance

Our results can be divided into three main parts. In theory, Goffman's analytical framework is extended to field of digital advertising research, and the audience acceptance perspective is included which was absent in previous media effectiveness studies. It is worth noting that this perspective is important but previous work usually ignored it. In research design stage, we use mixed-methods approach this time which can fill the research gap between large-scale questionnaire surveys and small qualitative studies, because previous work usually used only one method and the results were limited and cannot reflect the full picture. For practical application, we develop a "stereotype cognition toolkit" designed for media literacy education. This toolkit provides educators with evidence-based resources and can help young people analyze gender representation in advertisements.

4.3. Dissemination Plan

Findings will be disseminated through multiple channels:

Peer-reviewed journal article (target journals: Journal of Youth Studies, Sex Roles, Journal of Children and Media)

Conference presentations (International Communication Association, Society for Research on Adolescence)

Policy brief for educators, advertisers, and regulators

Open-access media literacy toolkit for secondary schools

4.4. Anticipated Limitations

While this study is designed to offer robust empirical insights, several limitations must be acknowledged.

Sample representativeness.

We recruit subjects from five middle schools in same region, and we try to include students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups as much as we can. But in fact, these samples cannot represent whole country. It is worth noting that results should not be generalized to youth groups in other regions and different educational settings, and the culture difference can also affect conclusion. In the future, we can repeat this study in more regions and countries.

Self-report bias.

In survey phase, we use self-report method. We collect data on four indicators: advertising exposure level, gender role attitude, self-esteem, and body image. These data have limitations. It is worth noting that social expectation bias can exist and recall accuracy can be insufficient. Also, participants can have different understanding of Likert scale items. To reduce such biases, we use a mature scale with verified psychometric attributes. We emphasize anonymity and this can guide participants to fill in the survey with true answers.

Cross-sectional design and causal inference.

In quantitative research section, we use cross-sectional survey. This scheme can trace the association characteristics between variables but we should note that it cannot determine the causal link between advertising exposure and identity output and this is expected to limit the conclusion strength. The results can be explained in other ways. It is worth noting that adolescents with traditional gender views can filter media content which reinforces these views. This is a reverse causality problem. Also, third-party variables not included in measurement such as parenting style and peer group influence can explain the correlations we observed. The qualitative module we set up can clarify the process of action and sort out the specific paths for association formation. In fact, we do not give causal conclusions in final analysis stage.

Coder subjectivity in content analysis.

We choose the coding system based on Goffman's (1979) framework, and it includes reliability testing where we select 20% of samples to complete dual coding and calculate Cohen's kappa coefficients at the same time. But even with these methods, the content analysis process can still have subjective interpretation. It is worth noting that some gender-related expressions are subtle and they are only valid in specific cultural contexts, so conventional quantitative analysis can not capture them well. To solve this problem, we put all coding rules into encoding manual. Also, we provide clear operational definitions for each rule. When coders have disagreements, we handle them through joint discussion.

Digital advertising measurement.

Accurate assessment of adolescent exposure to digital advertising faces many obstacles. It is worth noting that unlike TV commercial advertising, digital ads use algorithms for targeted delivery. They have short display cycles. Also, users can find it hard to distinguish them from the platform-native content (such as influencer endorsements). If we only use self-reported data from the respondents, it can deviate from the actual advertising exposure levels. We set up specific questions for different platforms to address shortcomings in the self-reported data and if conditions permit we can also compile statistics on the overall digital media usage habits of all respondents.

Age and developmental variability.

Adolescence covering ages 13 to 19 is a period when individuals can experience important changes in cognitive development, and also emotional and social aspects that happen together and can influence each other during this critical time window. Younger adolescents can process advertising information in a different way from older ones. But the sample size is limited, it is worth noting that it can be insufficient for fine-grained developmental subgroup analysis. Given the available conditions, we set age as moderating variable in quantitative analysis phase and we divide focus groups according to 13-15 and 16-19 age groups so we can capture subtle differences at different developmental stages.

Listing the limitations of this study is not expected to reduce the research value. In fact, it can help us define scope of related contributions. We use a mixed-gender research design in this paper. Also, we combine the patterns from quantitative analysis with the depth advantages of qualitative research, which can make up for some shortcomings existing in single research method and can help avoid the existing limitations of current research in this field. We have marked each limitation in detail and this can be used as a reference for future research.

5. Timeline

Months Activities

- 1-2 Literature review, ethics application, coding scheme development
- 3-5 Ad sampling, content analysis (Phase 1)
- 6-7 School recruitment, survey administration (Phase 2)

8 Focus groups and interviews (Phase 3)

9–10 Data analysis (quantitative: SPSS; qualitative: NVivo)

11–12 Writing, dissemination, toolkit development

6. Prior Work and Preparation

The researcher has completed foundational work relevant to this study:

Undergraduate dissertation: "Gender Portrayals in Prime-time TV Commercials" (Grade: First Class)

Research assistant: Project on social media and adolescent well-being (data collection and coding experience)

Publication: Short commentary on "Inclusive Advertising" in a student-led sociology journal

Training: Qualitative interviewing and SPSS (certificate completed)

7. Concluding Summary

We use a mixed-methods approach and it can help us examine gender stereotypes in advertisements. This method can also look at the role of these impressions in identity formation process of adolescents aged 13 to 19. In fact, this age group is in key developmental stage where external messages can have strong influence. We raise three questions. First, which types of stereotypes can be found in advertisements on market? Second, what impact can frequent exposure have on adolescents' self-awareness and developmental needs? Also, we examine how youth group can interpret such advertising content and they can respond to these messages when they see them in daily life.

Our research method has several new parts. We arrange the work as follows: First, we do quantitative content analysis on 200 advertisements, and then we use questionnaire survey for 400 young people. Next, we organize focus group discussions and interviews covering traditional TV platforms and also digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and we make comparisons between them, which can help fill gaps in existing research. By looking at authentic expressions of adolescents, we use qualitative research method. In fact, the study is not limited to correlation analysis and can explore the specific mechanisms of identity negotiation.

Current support includes access to advertising database and the campus network. It is worth noting that we can receive prior training and the mentor has professional experience in mixed-methods research which can provide guidance for the study and help improve the research quality in principle. 12-month project execution cycle can be feasible for us.

We can see the contribution from two sides. First, we extend the framework by Goffman (1979) to field of digital advertising research, which was not applied in this area before and can help us understand how people interact in the new media environment when they see advertisements on their mobile phones and computers. It is worth noting that this extension is important. Second, we produce practical outcomes including a policy brief for educators and advertising practitioners, and we also develop an open-access media literacy toolkit for the secondary schools that can be used in classroom teaching. This study has some limitations we should mention here. The sample representativeness is insufficient and there exists bias in the self-reporting. Also the cross-sectional design has inherent issues. The hybrid research approach we use in this study can provide references for academic research and educational practice, and it can help both researchers and practitioners to improve their work when they deal with similar problems in the future.

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Note: This research proposal is submission required by students and is still in early stage and is not finalized yet. It is worth noting that before we start data collection, we will submit application to Ethics Committee of Department of Sociology in University of Cambridge so we can get ethical review permission.