

## **SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING: LISTENING TO FEMALE NARRATIVES**

**Claudia Rosa Acevedo<sup>1</sup>**

Rua dos Escultores, 353 City Boaçava  
CEP: 05469-010 São Paulo/SP Brasil  
Tel.: (11) 3022 7404  
E-mail: [claudiaraac@uol.com.br](mailto:claudiaraac@uol.com.br)

**Helenita R. da Silva Tamashiro<sup>2</sup>**

Rua General Osório, 324  
CEP: 14010-000 Ribeirão Preto/SP Brasil  
Tel.: (16) 625 2912  
E-mail: [helenita@convex.com.br](mailto:helenita@convex.com.br)

**José Luis Garcia Hermosilla<sup>3</sup>**

Rua Padre Euclides, 995 - Campos Elíseos  
CEP: 14085-420 - Ribeirão Preto - SP  
Tels.: (16) 2101 1010  
E-mail: [posgraduacao@mouralacerda.com.br](mailto:posgraduacao@mouralacerda.com.br)

**Jouliana Jordan Nohara<sup>1</sup>**

Rua Alves Guimarães, 921 Pinheiros  
CEP: 05410-001 São Paulo/SP Brasil  
Tel.: (11) 3083 5232  
E-mail: [anasilvia@unifor.br](mailto:anasilvia@unifor.br)

**Ana Laura Arruda<sup>2</sup>**

Rua Moreira de Oliveira, 132  
CEP: 14010-00 Ribeirão Preto/SP Brasil  
Tel.: (16) 623 1647  
E-mail: [Laura@convex.com.br](mailto:Laura@convex.com.br)

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Nove de Julho - UNINOVE  
Departamento de Administração  
CEP: 05469-100 São Paulo/SP Brasil

<sup>2</sup> Faculdade de Administração de Orlândia  
CEP: 14620-000 Orlândia/SP Brasil

<sup>3</sup> Universidade de São Paulo – USP  
Departamento de Engenharia Mecânica  
CEP: 13566-590 São Carlos/SP Brasil

### **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this investigation is to understand social representations of women in advertising through female narratives. The data was gathered using in depth interviews. The narratives of seventy five women were analyzed based on the method of speech analysis. Results revealed three different perceptions about female portrayals in advertising: depreciated, idealizes and plural portrayals. In addition, results revealed that the informants compare themselves with advertising endorsers and believe that advertising imagery affect them in a negative way.

**Key words:** advertising, female images, consumer behavior, consumer perceptions.

## **SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING: LISTENING TO FEMALE NARRATIVES**

### **Introduction**

This article is related to consumer behavior strand of literature which studies exchanges between marketers and consumers to insure that they are fair, equitable, safe, or contribute to improved economic and social welfare (Robertson and Kassarian 1991). More specifically this research is related to the equitability research field which examines whether or not the marketing system has been exploiting or discriminating specific segments of the population, as women for example.

The main objective of this investigation is to add to understand social representations of women in advertising through female narratives. In this manner, the questions that motivated this paper were: Which are the social representation of women about female portrayals in advertising? Do they compare themselves with advertising endorsers? How these portrayals have been considered to their well being?

The present study was undertaken in San Paulo city in Brazil and employed a qualitative method. Moreover, the sample was composed by seventy five individuals who were selected by convenience method. In addition, this research uses a two folded framework in order to understand how women interpret and construct reality about the feminine element in advertising and how these ads affect them. In this way, it was selected the social representation theory and Festinger social comparison theory to shed light in our phenomenon.

This article is organized in six parts. The first part is the introduction. In the second it is presented a literature review on the theme. In the third section it is described the methodology adopted. Subsequently, the results and discuss are shown. Finally, the conclusion contains the implications of our results, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

## **Previous Research and Framework Theories**

### **Previous Research**

Majority of previous research related to advertising and gender have investigated *gender representations* in advertising. Not how women interpret these *representations*. However, these studies were undertaken since the early seventies. According to Kang (1997), previous investigations have provided consistent evidence that advertising messages about women were often stereotypical such as: women are irrational, weak, not intelligent, submissive and subservient. Indeed, Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) found that four stereotypes were predominant: 1) a woman's place is in the home; 2) women should not take important decisions or do important things; 3) women are dependent and need the protection of men; 4) men see women as a sexual object and not as a human being. Venkatesan and Losco (1975) results showed women as: 1) a sexual object, 2) physically beautiful and 3) dependent on men. In addition, Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) verified that women were represented primary as housewives. In the eighties, similar research also showed that the stereotyped portrayals of women still persisted in the media (Blackwood 1983; Bretl and Cantor 1988; Jolliffe 1989; Luebke 1989).

In a study which aimed at analyzing gender portrayals according to categories proposed by previous study (Goffman 1979), Kang (1997) found that female roles, in 1991, were still portrayed in a stereotyped way. In his investigation he identified four significant pictures:

- “Feminine touch” – Women portrayed using the hands to show or caress an object.
- “Ritualization of subordination” – woman in a submissive body position or behavior

- “Licensed withdraw” – woman is psychologically removed from the picture which results in leaving the women dependent on the man’s protection
- “Body display” – high degree of nudity or with body revealing clothes

Recently, a substantial portion of advertising literature has examined the negative social effects (commonly denominated as “unintended consequences of advertising”) of idealized portrayals in media (Martin and Kennedy 1993; Pollay 1986; Stice and Shaw 1994) found a positive association between idealized imagery in advertisements, self-esteem and self-image.

It was selected three Brazilian studies to shed light to the results of this study. The first investigation presented is Sabat’s (2001) study about gender and sexuality in advertising. The second one is Rocha (1984) investigation about idealized portrayals in advertisements and the third is Freyre’s (2003) work about the XVIII and XIX century Brazilian patriarchal society where he describes women’s roles during that period. The first two investigations directly address advertising. The third contribution is a classic masterpiece in Sociology, History and Anthropology about Brazilian society in the XVIII and XIX centuries. Freyre’s (2003) work was chosen in the literature review because his portrayals of Brazilian women seem to be the foundation to understand gender relations and identities in modern Brazilian society.

Analyzing gender representations and sexuality in advertising, Sabat (2001) suggested advertisements should work as a cultural pedagogy that teaches members of a given society how to be women or men, what is femininity and masculinity, hence, producing, in this way, identities and representations of reality. Sabat (2001) argues that advertising doesn’t create meanings but borrows them from social relations, while, at the same time, these advertisements reaffirm and consolidate these very same representations, as for instance, “women always at home or exhibiting their bodies to men pleasure” (Sabat 2001, 14).

Rocha (1984) argues that advertising dictates identity processes, life styles and reality to consumers. In his work, Rocha (1984) examined how commercials idealize reality giving a magic solution to consumer problems. He suggests that ads intervene, transform and reorganize every day life in a magic manner. The author compares commercial with myths arguing that one characteristic of a myth is the similarity to dreams and fairy tales where everything is possible.

According to Freyre (2003) women belonging to the patriarchal system had their social participations circumscribed to the domestic realm. Their roles were limited to be mother and to manage the house. Indeed, it was expected from them to supervise the slaves who worked

in the house and to look after the children. In fact, this period was characterized by the absence of feminine roles in politics, literature, education, science and public policies.

Indeed, woman was totally uneducated. According to Freyre (2003), Brazilian society had imposed to women a “specialization” in the “fragile sex” or in the “beauty sex”. This specialization could even deform her. Indeed, the body was disfigured by the “corset” which was used to make the waist fine. The feet were forced to become small in order to be different from the “*Negro*’s” feet, which were scrubbed and scratched.

In addition, according to Topinard (apud Freyre 2003), the patriarchal regime influenced the “specialization” of feminine physical body in order to differentiate the sexes. This specialization of the body was also related to female roles in the society. It was associated to the mother function or to a romantic idealized portrayal. Thus, women from this period should be first, in the adolescence, pale, slim and fragile in order to inspire young men dreams.. However, after the marriage she would become fat, deformed into a “shapeless mass”. In this period of her life, she was the housekeeper and the procreator of the patriarchal family.

Freyre (2003) also emphasized how female body in Brazilian patriarchal regime was idealized by men. In this idealized portrayal woman had gracious feet, fine waist, delicate hands, and big bosoms. According to the author, it was a “narcissistic cult” of the patriarchal man who dominated the weak sex and “pretended to adore her in order to feel stronger” (Freire 2003, 213). To sum up, Freyre (2003) suggested that in the patriarchal society women were “fragile”, “beauty” and the “domestic”.

## **The Social Representation Theory and the Social Comparison Theory**

### **Social Representation Theory**

Social representations can be defined as the results of elaboration processes about the reality by a given society. The “social representations” construct refers to how individuals fabricate their perceptions about themselves, about the world, about their relationships with the world and with each others. Thus, this concept deals with how individuals conceive “objects” of the reality, including themselves. The production of these representations is elaborated in any public dimension of the society, such as, in the streets, in advertising, in social institutions or social movements (Boas, Neto and Cramer 2001; Guareshi and Jovchelovitch 1995).

In this context, Jovchelovitch (1995) notes that, as social representations are psychosocial phenomena, they are necessarily produced in public arenas, in the realm where he or she relates to the “other”. In addition, social representations are created in the domain where dwellers of a specific community acquire identities and forge their cultural symbols. Individuals mentioned in the social constructions theory are bound not only to a specific society and culture, but also to a specific period of history (Boas et al 2001; Spink 1995). Furthermore, according to Minayo (1995) and Farr (1995), communication constitutes the realm where social representations can be apprehended because language is its most important source.

The social constructions theory has been applied to feminine studies (Boas et al 2001; Sabat 2001) in order to better understand the gender identity approach which also encompasses a socially constructed idea. In this way, it is with this aim that we have borrowed this theoretical framework from literature.

The gender concept has emerged in the sixties in order to embrace ideas related to the masculine and the feminine roles in a given society (Louro 1997). While the concept “sex” refers to the biological aspect of the human being, this new construct represents a social category which is associated to subjective meanings of male and female identities created by the society where they are embedded. Thus, the gender concept has a historical and a social dimension, because it varies according to the culture and the period of time when it belongs (Scott 1995; Medrado 1996). In this way, gender identity can be grasped from subjective narratives and from behaviors.

According to Sabat (2001) gender identities can be captured from advertising portrayals. Indeed, representations embedded in advertising portrayals, not only do they reflect gender differences in the society, but also corroborate them. According to this author, a typical representation about femininity is the maternity image or of a perfect body. Indeed, as other social institutions, advertising tends to reproduce specific types of behaviors and personal values which conform with the culture of the society (Sabat 2001).

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Based on the Social Comparison theory (Festinger 1954) many researchers (Gulas and Mckeage 2000; Lennon and Lillethun 1999; Martin and Gentry 1997; Richins 1991; Thornton and Maurice 1999) have proposed that idealized portrayals in advertising can affect viewers because they compare themselves with people portrayed in ads.

Social comparison theory was originally developed by Festinger in 1954 in order to explain how and why individuals evaluate themselves in comparison with others. He suggested that individuals tend to objectively compare themselves. However, provided that the objective criterion is not available, they will appraise themselves in comparison with others. One aspect of his theory was the similarity hypothesis that proposed that people compare themselves with similar ones. Besides, other elements in his theory were as follows: 1) the comparison process was related to the assessment of abilities and opinions, 2) comparison was made with people pertaining from the same group of the individual who has engaged in the comparison process, and 3) the individual was aiming at appraising himself in order to have a standard of evaluation, hence, it was a sought comparison. In spite of these specific conditions, further researchers have expanded the comprehensiveness of his theory. Indeed, new contributions have found that social comparison also occurs when people evaluate their personal traits or circumstances (Richins 1991; Wood 1989). In addition, other researchers have suggested that people also compare themselves with others who belong to other group, for instance, models in advertisements. (Richins 1991). Furthermore, recent investigations have proposed that unsought comparison may occur (Goethals 1986). Actually, researchers have suggested that advertising portraying “better of” people (wealthy, happy and beautiful) tend to trigger social comparison without conscious effort. In this way, it was chosen Festinger (1954) social comparison theory to understand why women interviewed in the present study engage in an appraisal process taking advertising endorsers as a standard.

## **Method**

The present study was undertaken employing a qualitative method. The sample of the present study was composed of seventy five individuals who were selected by convenience method in São Paulo city, Brazil. The data was gathered using in depth interviews. The variables researched were: 1) women social representations of female portrayals in ads; 2) the effects of these interpretations in how they feel about themselves and 3) the feelings of identification with these interpretations. It was asked to the participants, for example: “how do you feel about female portrayals in advertising?” It is important to stress that we haven’t shown any advertising to interviewees. Conversely, we have asked them to tell us about their perceptions in ads in general. The interviews lasted on average one hour and were conducted by a “senior” researcher and one assistant, trained to accomplish the task. The interviews were recorded and

transcribed. The names of the participants were not utilized in order to preserve their anonymity.

The social class scale applied to classify the participants was from Almeida and Wickerhauser proposed in 1991 (apud Mattar 1992), which is commonly used in Brazil to operationalize the social class construct. . By this criterion, five social classes levels are produced, that is, A, B, C, D and E, which are the five levels that official statistics utilize to classify Brazilian population. In this manner, it was found that 17.3% of the participants belonged to social class A 38.7% to B, 22.7% to C and 21.3% to class D.

The level of education of the respondents was the following: 53.3% have no college and 46.7% have finished their college studies. On the other hand, their age brackets were composed in the following manner: 17-20 (6.7%), 20-29 (25.3%), 30-39 (26.2%), 40-49 (21.3%), 50-59 (14.7%), 60-69 (4%), 70 and over (1.3%). Moreover, half of the sample reported being married and the other half (43%) to be single. Only 6 % were separated or divorced.

The interviews were read by all the researchers who were members of the team. The objective of this analysis was to identify important themes in the data. After the preliminary readings, separately, the researchers summarized the replies to each question in one or two words or phrases. In the second stage the replies were analyzed again with the intention of verifying whether these words or phrases produced referred to a single thought or expressed separate ideas. When a single response contained more than one idea, the phrases were separated, computing different thoughts. When the phrases produced were inter- related, being thus part of a single concept, another concept was produced in order to express their thought. In a third step researchers discussed the individual work of each other attempting to reach a consensus on the concepts produced.

## **Results**

Analysis of the data revealed the existence of three main themes throughout the interviews. Such themes are related to three different perceptions about how advertising depicts women portrayals. They were portrayals that depreciated women, portrayals that idealized them and portrayals that pictured women in a modern way. Table 1 summarizes the participants feelings about female representations in advertising.

**Table: Social Representation of Women in Advertising**



<b>DEPRECIATED PORTRAYALS</b>	<b>IDEALIZED PORTRAYALS</b>	<b>MODERN WOMEN PORTRAYALS</b>
Not intelligent / irrational	Physically perfect : always young, beautiful, skinny and always tidy	Independent (from man)
Window-display: as if she were a “hanger”, a “package” or a “shelf” where the product is exhibited to be sold	Absence of features of Brazilian women absence of mixed races as black and brown skinned women	Super woman Being able to be mother, professional, and wife at the same time
Body display: high degree of nudity or with body revealing clothes		
Housewives		

The label "depreciated portrayals" was adopted to describe the interviewees' perception of four portrayals, that is: 1) “women as not intelligent or irrational” 2) “window-display”; 3) “body display”; and 4) as “housewives”. It was decided to use the construct “depreciated portrayals”, because the idea of depreciation was objectively present in the informant's speeches when describing these pictures. The labels which were applied were constructed in order to be as near as possible to what informants narrated. However, when it was possible, it was used a label that already existed in literature. In this way, the label “women as not intelligent or irrational” was cited by Kang (1997). In addition, “body display” was applied by Goffman (1979) to describe portrayals related to high degree of nudity or body revealing clothes. The label “housewives” was used by Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976). “Window-display” emerged from the interviewees descriptions. These labels are explained in the item “depreciated portrayals”.

Another perception reported by the interviewees is associated to the idea that portrayals in advertising are idealized, and in this way, they are very far from their reality. So it was called the “idealized portrayals”. The informants distinguished two aspects of idealization in advertising: 1) “woman as physically perfect”, which is, always young, beautiful, skinny and always tidy; 2) “absence of features of Brazilian women”, which is, the absence of mixed races as black and brown skinned women. In this picture women are blond, tall and have white skin. These labels emerged from the informant speeches. Each of these concepts is discussed in the item “idealized portrayals”.

A third group of perception was that advertising pictures women in a modern way. This idea emerged in two different ways, that is, woman as 1) independent from man; and as 2) Super woman - being able to be mother, professional, and wife concomitantly. It was called "the

modern woman". The reason to use these labels was based again in the speeches of the informants and in previous research (Jaffe and Berger 1994). These labels are discussed in the section "modern women portrayals".

### **Depreciated portrayals:**

The perception of women as "not intelligent or irrational" refers to the image of "women whose intelligence is not exploited", to "the woman that is no good at thinking", or whose body is idealized in opposition of her intelligence. This idea is illustrated in the following passage from an interview:

- *"Women are always portrayed as beautiful, but brainless. Their bodies are displayed but not their ideas. They don't think, don't ask, they just appear and sell the products..."*

The second concept related to depreciation is the image of "window-display" which is employed to sell the product. The informants understand that the image of women is exploited as if it were a "hanger", a "package" or a "shelf" where the product is exhibited to be sold. In this way, women are stripped of humanity becoming unanimated beings, as the central focus is the sale. These portrayals were labeled as "window-display" because this idea was strongly stressed by the informants. This feeling is expressed in the following quotation:

- *"I think woman is being devaluated, because she is portrayed as a gift wrapped. She is portrayed as merchandise, I mean, like a hanger. The item is hung on it and she must sell it together with her beauty. Many examples of what I am saying are presented in beer advertisements. Woman is nothing more than a product that helps to increase sales."*

The concept of "body display" is related to nudity, to the exposition of the body. The feminine figure is once again employed to sell the product, but in this metaphor body display is the central point. It represents the main tool to draw the attention of the consumer. This idea can be depicted from the following quotations:

- *"I think that the product should be shown more than the woman. But companies normally do the opposite. I believe there is an excessive exposition of woman body and there is no need to be shown so indiscreetly."*

- *"Barely are they depicted with clothes, because it helps to sell... I don't identify with these portrayals because they are vulgar. They are shown almost naked."*

The portrayal of housewives refers to a stereotype of women roles in society. This feeling is expressed in the following passage:

- *“Women are portrayed as being beautiful, sexy or housewives. They are always shown selling electric domestic appliances.... However, today women have new roles in our society. They are not full time housewives anymore, but this is not shown in advertising. It is a totally distorted image...”*

### **Idealized portrayals:**

The concept of the physically perfect woman is related to the imposition of a particular standard of beauty, namely tall, slim, blond, and young. Interviewees reported that they don't identify with this kind of ideal as they know another reality and they are conscious that women shown in the media are not those found in their every day lives. In addition, the beauty idea of being slim was highly criticized, not only because it doesn't correspond to the reality of ordinary women, but also because it is seen as a danger to both adults and adolescent psychological health.

It is interesting to note that some of the interviewees clearly deny these portrayals imposed by the media, identifying them as “not normal standards”, and they, the interviewees, are the ones who fit to normal patterns. The informants also expressed their disbelief to the always perfect condition in which women are shown, such as, with the hair always perfect and well dressed.

It is also important to emphasize that despite the fact that the majority of interviewees did not identify themselves with the idealized portrayals, these were the portrayals that provoked most of the complaints of negative sentiments about themselves. It can be verified from the data that: 1) they do compare to these portrayals and 2) the idealized portrayals have a negative impact to their self-esteem and their own portrayals. Some affirmed that they feel depressed and suffer from anxiety and feeling of inferiority. Such sentiments are accompanied by a negative devaluation of their body and a desire to change it. The physically perfect woman image constructed by informants can be grasped from the following quotations:

- *“She always appears with perfect hair, with a perfect figure and is very slim. This is extremely alienating; neither are we beautiful all the time, nor well dressed all the time”.*

- *“A typical woman in advertisements has everything in the right place. They are beautiful and have the right measurements. I feel fat when I compare myself physically to women in advertisements. I feel really depressed! An ordinary woman feels like garbage.”*

- *“Women shown in the advertisements have a perfect figure, no cellulite, no belly...They are slim, tall, beautiful, young, and blond.”*

- *“It is obvious that people would like to have a tall, slim figure. But the advertisements show women as practically skin and bones. These pictures are dangerous, especially for young people who try to become similar to these portrayals.”*

- *“I don’t think I am outside the standard, I am not that naive. There are many women who are like me, I mean, not so slim like the models in advertising. They are too much thin. They are not normal. I am the one who is normal! ... I have not seen any advertising which takes my age group for granted (55 years old) or my professional segment. They don’t seem to have anything to do with me.”*

This idealization is also understood by the interviewees as the absence of features of Brazilian women. For the interviewees the media tends to ignore black and mixed races. The image of the Caucasian (white and blond) is transmitted as the ideal of beauty. Interviewees have argued that other types of beauty, especially from different regions of the country should be portrayed. In this way, this perception is also dominated by disbelief and criticism of the standards imposed by the media. Consider the views expressed in the following quotations:

- *“I have a fair skin, thus I don’t feel very different to what they show. I don’t feel discriminated against, but if I were black I would feel so. I think they should portray other features of Brazilian women. They are usually shown as blond. Black and white mixed race is never depicted. There is no explanation to this in a melting pot country like Brazil.*

- *“The typical women depicted on advertisements are white, blond and young. Black women or mixed race are hardly ever shown”.*

### **Modern Women Portrayals**

Many interviewees understand that advertising portrayed women in a positive way. These portrayals were “independence” and “superwoman”. The concept of independence relates to the liberation from male domination in various aspects of life, such as financially, emotionally

and psychologically speaking. It represents the ability to resolve their problems and live on their own. Consider the views expressed in the following quotations:

- *“advertising are showing portrayals of the modern woman, such as, woman as a bread winner.”*

- *Women are resolving practically everything. They are taking the place of men. They can do whatever they want without worrying about what others may say.” And ads are depicting this new image.*

- *“Some advertisements portray woman as independent. A woman who really knows what she wants. ...”.*

Similarly the concept of “superwoman” relates to the ability to perform various roles at the same time, in other words to be mother, housewife, a successful professional and an attractive woman at the same time. The following quotations illustrate this concept:

- *“It is a super woman. She manages to do everything. She looks after the house, the children, the husband and is a professional”.*

- *“Today woman plays the role of mother, professional, wife, housewife, without stress or problems and advertising shows these new roles.”*

- *“A housewife, a mother, an example of beauty and an executive: These are the ways as advertisements are depicting us because we can really perform all these roles in the same time”*

## **Discussion**

First of all, part of the members of the sample affirmed that they do not identify with these portrayals because they depreciate female roles or because they are unreal. Moreover, our informants showed to be not passive viewers who accept television portrayals without questioning them. On the contrary, they criticized and compared these portrayals with what they used to see in their every day lives. One example of this fact is the criticism that very few portrayals of black or mixed races are seen in advertisements.

In addition, previous research has found that advertising has depicted women with “clichés” portrayals and does not reflect their real roles in society. These studies described female’s roles as: full time “housewives”, “not intelligent”, “irrational”, “body display” and

“physically beautiful”. The present study did not investigate advertisements, but females’ perceptions of women in advertising. However, our results have revealed that our informants also feel that female portrayals in advertising are portrayed in a stereotyped way. Hence, this investigation indicates that the same patterns of portrayals which have been found since the mid seventies in previous research permeate our informant representations of female imagery in Brazilian advertising.

It is interesting to call the attention to how the interpretations of idealized portrayals made by our informants are consistent with Rocha (1984) results. Like this author, our interviewees also stressed the fairy tale aspect of ads and how they narrate a perfect and magic life where everything is possible. On the other hand, previous research has found a relationship between idealized portrayals in advertising, self-esteem and self-image. Indeed, many of our respondents reported not feeling comfortable with the idealized portrayals, as these portrayals impact their self-esteem. This fact emerged from the criticisms that these portrayals don’t correspond to the real world and that they affect the psychological health of women. Low self esteem, depression and anxiety were the feelings that the respondents described as a result from comparison processes to these idealized portrayals.

Indeed, in this way, it is clear that some of the informants do compare themselves with advertising endorsers and that the result of this appraisal process is negative, because they feel devaluated. Yet, it is important to note that these results are consistent with new contributions to Festinger (1954) theory which have found that social comparison also occurs when individuals assess their personal traits and that this phenomenon is also triggered by unsought comparison. In this investigation we could identify that the social comparison process was triggered without conscious effort, was related to personal traits and was associated with individuals who belonged to another group, the advertising endorsers.

In Freyre (2003) descriptions about women in the patriarchal society, some themes are outstanding, such as: the association of women to the domestic dimension of life, the role of mother and housekeeper; the absence of the feminine role in public domains of the society; women’s lack of education; the specialization and the idealization of the body. Indeed, these themes, in some way, have also emerged from the data. The housekeeper and mother’s roles are related to the image of “housewife”. In addition, the portrayal of the feminine as “not intelligent” is, in some way, linked to the idea of not educated. In the patriarchal regime women were kept illiterate in order to be dominated and not to participate in other arenas. According to informant’s speeches, although women are intelligent, their abilities are not

explored in advertising portrayals. Hence, messages transmitted by advertising about women are that they are not able to perform roles that demand their reasoning capabilities. In this way, in both periods, the lack of reasoning competence made her body to be the center of the attention.

On the other hand, the idealization of the body described by Freyre (2003) is associated to the “physically perfect” image which emerged from our data. In this portrayal the central points are beauty and perfectionism. Another element that is present is youth. In the interviewees’ perceptions of advertising imagery, women are always young. Yet, in the patriarchal regime the idealized women were the young virgins. In addition, women from the XVIII and XIX century deformed her body in order to be beautiful in men’s eyes. So far, some of our informants reported to be worried with their bodies and would like to change them in order to become as beautiful as advertising endorsers. Hence, both women accept to change their bodies searching for the perfect one.

Moreover, Freyre’s (2003) descriptions denounce how prejudice was the patriarchal society against women. She was considered the “fragile sex” and the “fleshly puppet”. Also, she was confined to artificial situations to provide pleasure to male. Besides, gender relations were dominated by men and they were molded in order to satisfy their narcissistic satisfaction. In this way, the data reveals portrayals which are impregnated by prejudice against women. This sentiment becomes apparent through the “depreciated portrayals”. On the other hand, the portrayal of “physically perfect” insinuates a hidden trace of male domination. It denotes a necessity to be always beautiful and tidy in order to be admired by men. Hence, to be physically perfect to men’s eyes is the ultimate purpose. It is also important to shed light to the portrayal of idealization related to “absence of features of Brazilian women”. According to Freyre (2003), Brazilian society overwhelmed race prejudice. However, this portrayal can be a hint that, as sex, race prejudice still persists in this society.

While literature defines social representations as the results of elaboration processes about the reality by members of a given society, it can interpret the results in the following way: the eight portrayals (not intelligent, window-display, body-display, housewives, physically perfect, absence of features of Brazilian women, independent and superwoman) are social representations produced by our informants who are dwellers of Brazilian society. These social representations were fabricated not only by the informants but, conversely, they were forged in partnership with other members of the same society, because social representations are shared with other individuals and are produced in public arenas.

In addition, it can be understood that these social representations constitute a realm where their gender identities are constructed. Moreover, according to Sabat (2001), representations embedded in advertising, not only do they reflect gender differences in the society, but also corroborate them. In this way, the eight portrayals concocted by the informants reflect not only gender relations and identities, but also values, and behaviors which conform to Brazilian society. Besides, the eight portrayals teach women what is femininity and consolidate women roles in Brazilian society.

However, it is extremely important to note that both gender identity conflict and gender relation conflict are embedded in the eight portrayals constructed by the informants. Through the interviewees speeches emerged representations that they mentioned as the way how advertising conceived femininity. However, they deny these portrayals as their real portrayals and blame advertising for stereotyping their roles or idealizing them. However, portrayals narrated by the informants clearly denounce a system where male dominant meanings still persist. Indeed, the depreciated and the idealized portrayals encode allegorical meanings about how male conceive females in Brazil. Nonetheless, these two portrayals are not accepted by women of this study. Hence, this two opposite perceptions produce gender relation conflicts. On the other hand, we can interpret that the third picture, the modern women image, represents how women are striving to forge their new identities in Brazilian society. However, these women know that society still wants them to incorporate the roles mentioned in the depreciated and idealized portrayals, thus, this two opposite approaches trigger an identity conflict. Hence, this gender conflict issue constitutes the new hypotheses that we can launch to explain the phenomenon we have investigated. In other words, we can say that these eight portrayals were constructed because they express a main issue that surrounds social relations, which are, gender identity and gender relation conflicts. As this phenomenon exists in their world, it is also present in their social representations about reality.

## **Conclusion**

The main objective of this research was to investigate how women interpret female portrayals in advertising. Results revealed three main themes, which are related to three different perceptions. They are portrayals that devaluate or idealize women and portray them in a modern way. In addition, the study has established two secondary objectives, which were: to examine if women compare themselves with advertising portrayals and if they do how they perceive that they affect them. Results showed that not only do the informants compare



themselves with advertising endorsers, but also believe that advertising imagery affect them in a negative way, as their psychological health is affected by making them feel depressed and anxious.

According to Sabat (2001) when advertising employs a specific image this means that this speech already exists in the society. Hence, we can interpret that these three themes which are impregnated in the portrayals constructed by our informants reflect society gender relations and identities. Moreover, as one of them is the opposite in relation to the two others, we can interpret that these portrayals denounce a gender conflict in the society. Furthermore, as the interviewees deny two of the three portrayals they perceive in advertising, this fact also denotes a gender identity conflict. Therefore, our study, which aimed at understanding social representations by our informants' speeches, found that Brazilian society is permeated by conflicts of gender relations and identities and that these conflicts are shared not only by our interviewees but also with other members of the society.

Some implications to social police makers can be drawn from this investigation. This study revealed that participants feel negatively affected by the depreciated and idealized portrayals shown in ads. Moreover, it is clear that the informants did compare themselves with advertising endorsers. In this manner, social police makers should understand why this is happening. Moreover, they need to investigate which is the cause of these interpretations. In addition, social policy makers could investigate female portrayals in Brazilian advertisings to realize if they are discriminating women, in other words they should check if the interpretations of these participants reflect representations of women in Brazilian advertising.

As to any research, this study has limitations that also suggest possibilities for future investigative endeavor. For instance, future research could investigate relations between portrayal of women in the media and variables such as self-esteem, self-image and self-satisfaction. In addition, new research about female portrayals can examine advertisements using content analysis and comparing them with women's perceptions.

## References

- BELKAOUI, Ahmed and BELKAOUI, Janice M. A comparative analysis of the roles portrayed by women in print advertisements: 1958, 1970, 1972, *Journal of Marketing Research*, XIII (May) 168-172, 1976.
- BLACKWOOD, Roy E. The content of news photos: roles portrayed by men and women. *Journalism Quarterly*, 60, (1), 710-14, 1983.
- BRETL, Daniel .J. and CANTOR, Joanne. The portrayal of men and women in u.s. television commercials: a recent content analysis and trends over15 years, *Sex Roles*, 18 (9/10), 595-609, 1988.
- COURTNEY, Alice E. and LOCKERETZ, Sarah W. A Woman's Place: an Analysis of The Roles Portrayed by Women in Magazine Advertisements. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8 (Feb.), 92-95, 1971.
- FARR, Robert M. Representações Sociais: a Teoria e sua História. In: Guareschi, Pedrinho A and Sandra Jovchelovitch, *Textos em representações sociais*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 31-59, 1995.
- FESTINGER, Leon. A Theory of Social Comparison Processes. *Human Relations*, 7, (May), 117-140, 1954.
- FREYRE, Gilberto. *Sobrados e Mucambos*, São Paulo, Global, 2003.
- GOETHALS, George R. Social Comparison Theory: Psychology from the Lost and Found". *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, (September, 12), 261-278, 1986.
- GOFFMAN, Erving. *Gender Advertisements*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- GUARESCHI, Pedrinho A. and JOVCHELOVITCH, Sandra. *Textos em Representações Sociais*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1995.
- GULAS, Charles S. and MCKEAGE, Kim. Extending Social Comparison: An examination of the Unintended Consequences of Idealized Advertising Imagery. *Journal of Advertising*, 29, (Summer, 2), 17-28, 2000.
- JAFFE, Lynn J. and BERGER, Paul D. The effect of modern female sex role portrayals on advertising effectiveness. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 34, (Jul-Aug, n. 4), 32-50, 1994.
- JOLLIFFE, Lee B. Comparing Gender Differentiation in the New York Times, 1885 and 1985, *Journalism Quarterly*, 62, (1), 683-91, 1989.

- JOVCHELOVITCH, Sandra. Vivendo a Vida com os Outros: Intersubjetividade, Espaço Público e Representações Sociais. In: GUARESCHI, Pedrinho A. and JOVCHELOVITCH, Sandra. *Textos em representações sociais*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 63-85, 1995.
- KANG, Mee-Eun. The Portrayal of Women's Portrayals in Magazine Advertisements: Goffman's Gender Analysis Revisited, *Sex Roles*, 37, (Dec., 11/12), 979-997, 1997.
- LENNON, Sharron J.; LILLETHUN, Abby and BUCKLAND, Sandra S. Attitudes Towards Social Comparison as a Function Self-Esteem: Idealized Appearance And Body Image. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 27, (Jun, n. 4), 379-405, 1999.
- LOURO, Guacira.L. *Gênero, sexualidade e educação: uma perspectiva pós-estruturalista*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1997.
- LUEBKE, Barbara F. Out of focus: portrayals of women and men in news article photographs, *Sex Roles*, 20, (3/4), 121-33, 1989.
- MARTIN, Mary and KENNEDY, Patricia F. Advertising and social comparison: consequences for female preadolescents and adolescents, *Psychology & Marketing*, 10 (6), 513-530, 1993.
- MINAYO, Maria C. O Conceito de Representações Sociais Dentro da Sociologia Clássica. In: GUARESCHI, Pedrinho A. and JOVCHELOVITCH, Sandra. *Textos em representações sociais*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 89-111, 1995.
- MARTIN, Mary and GENTRY, James W. Stuck in the model trap: the effects of beautiful models in ads on female pre-adolescents and adolescents. *Journal of Advertising*, 26 (Summer, 2), 19-33, 1997.
- MATTAR, Fauze N. *Pesquisa de marketing*, São Paulo, Atlas, 1993.
- MEDRADO, Benedito. A masculinidade nos comerciais de televisão, In: ANPOCS, 20, CD-ROM, 1996.
- POLLAY, Richard W. The distorted Mirror: reflections on the Unintended consequences of Advertising. *Journal of Marketing*, 50 (April), 18-36, 1986.
- RICHINS, Marshal L. Social comparison and the idealized portrayals of advertising, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18 (June), 71-83, 1991.
- ROCHA, Everardo. *Magia e capitalismo*, São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1995.

- ROBERTON, Thomas S. and KASSARJIAN, Harold H. Handbook of Consumer Behavior, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1991.
- SABAT, Ruth. Pedagogia cultural, gênero e sexualidade”, *Estudos Feministas*, 11 (2º Semester, Year 9), 9-21, 2001.
- SCOTT, Joan. Gênero: uma categoria útil para análise histórica, In: *Educação e realidade*, 20 (Jul./Dez, 2), 71-99, 1995.
- SPINK, Mary J. Desvendando as teorias implícitas: uma metodologia de análise das representações sociais. In: Guareschi, Pedrinho A. and Sandra Jovchelovitch, *Textos em representações sociais*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 117-145, 1995.
- STEPHENS, Debra Lynn and HILL, Ronald Paul and HANSON, Cynthia. The beauty myth e female consumers: The controversial role of advertising. *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* (Summer), 137-149, 1994.
- STICE, Eric and SHAW, Heather. Adverse Effects of the Media Portrayed Thin-ideal on Women and Linkages to Bulimic Symptomatology, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 13, 288-308, 1994.
- THORNTON, Bill and MAURICE, Jason K. Physical attractiveness contrast effect and the moderating influence of self-consciousness, *Sex Roles*, 40 (Mar. 5/6), 379-392, 1999.
- VENKATESAN, Manikanda. and LOSCO, Jean P. Women in magazine ads: 1959-71, *Journal of Advertising Research*, 15 (Oct. 5), 49-54, 1975.
- VILAS BOAS, Luis H.; de PAULA NETO, Alcielis and CRAMER, Luciana. Representações da diferenciação e assimetrias de gênero no espaço organizacional: um estudo no setor de vendas de veículos, In: Encontro Anual da Associação dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Administração, 25º ENANPAD, Campinas, 2001.
- WILLIAMSON, Judith. *Decoding advertisements: ideology and meaning in advertising*. London, Marion Bayars, 1978.
- WOOD, Joanne V. Theory and research concerning social comparisons of personal attributes, *Psychological Bulletin*, 106, (Sep.), 231-248, 1989.