Social Representations of Women in Advertising Images

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Abstract:

The main objective of this investigation is to add to our understanding how women in Brazil interpret female portrayals in publicity. The secondary objectives are to examine if women compare themselves with advertising images and if they do how they perceive that they affect them. The research uses a three folded framework: the social representation theory, the gender identity approach and Festinger (1954) social comparison theory to shed light in our phenomenon. Besides, the present study applied the grounded theory research method. The data was gathered using in depth interviews and semi-structured instruments. The sample was composed of sixty individuals selected by convenience method. Results revealed three different perceptions about female portrayals in advertising: the depreciated and the idealized images and the modern women images. Additionally, our analyses have shown that these three images denounce gender identity and relation conflicts in Brazilian society. In addition, results revealed that the informants not only do compare themselves with advertising endorsers, but also believe that mass media imagery affect them in a negative way, as their psychological health is affected by making them feel depressed and anxious.

1. Introduction

Recently, many communication researchers have focused their studies on the construction of meanings which viewers produce from advertising contents (WILLIAMSON, 1978; McCracken 1989; Mick; Buhl 1992; Mick; Politı 1989; Scott 1994; Thompson, 1997; Parker, 1998). Theorists have proposed that the process of advertising consumption is framed by consumer perceptions which are embedded in their own experiences, values, cultural codes and personal traits. Hence, audience interpretation is an intrinsic and active process and the results can be distant from the inputs provided by the seller (Hirschman, Thompson, 1997; Kang, 1997).

Indeed, this approach is consistent with the “theory of social representations” (Jovchelovitch, 1995, Minayo, 1995, Spink, 1995) that states that representations of a reality are constructed by the individual in order to interpret, understand and create its identity in society. Thus, according to this theory, reality is subjective. Social representations can be defined as a system of interpretations of the dwellers of a specific society about its institutions, models, people and culture. They constitute a specific knowledge which is socially constructed and shared by its people and which the final goal is to interpret the reality (Jodelet, 1989). Hence, researchers can investigate a specific society by exploring its individual’s social representations which reflect and can explain reality (Cramer; Brito; Capelle, 2001).

One reason why advertising has always faced substantial scrutiny by researchers is the fact that the product is meant to target a specific segment, but its advertising is consumed indistinctly by a broader group (Rocha, 1994) thus, its effects have a larger impact in society. Yet, one of the criticism which is most cited worldwide is the stereotyped image of women. In Brazil, since the late nineties many newspapers and magazines have published articles about this subject. In addition, in this country, women protection organizations have been denouncing the growing vulgarization of female image in the mass media since the last decade (Lobo; Athayde, 2003).
But how do Brazilian women interpret female portrayals in advertising? Are advertising images perceived by Brazilian women as stereotyped? Do Brazilian women compare themselves with advertising endorsers? Have these portrayals been considered as negative inputs to their well-being? Despite the fact that society is concerned with female images in the mass media, little is known about how Brazilian women interpret how publicity depicts their images. Indeed, an investigation on the main Brazilian academic journals and proceedings in administration, no articles related to advertising images were found. Conversely, we have identified some few investigations associated to this subject in areas such as pedagogy, anthropology, female studies and sociology. However, in the U.S.A this subject matter has been investigated by Marketing researchers since the early seventies (VENKATESAN; LOSCO, 1975; BELKAOU; BELKAOU, 1976).

Nonetheless, no society can neglect to understand how individuals perceive the images that media construct about them. Therefore, research in this vein is of value and presents extreme contribution not only to Marketing and Advertising Research in Brazil, but also to Brazilian society where these advertisements are embedded. Hence, the main objective of this investigation is to add to our understanding how women in Brazil interpret female portrayals in publicity. The secondary objectives aim at identifying if and how advertising affect female consumers. Therefore, they are: to examine if women compare themselves with advertising images and if they do how they perceive that they affect them.

In addition, this research uses a three folded framework in order to understand how women interpret and construct reality about the feminine element in commercial images and how these ads affect them. In this way, we have selected the social representation theory, the gender identity approach and Festinger social comparison theory to shed light in our phenomenon. The social representations theory seems to explain better how elements of the real world (advertising imagery, for example) are perceived by individuals of a given society. Actually, we are interested in how informants construct meanings from advertising contents, and not in their objective contents. Indeed, the study has focused on “their reality”, and not on the “actual reality”. Conversely, the gender identity approach sounds to be a suggestive frame of reference to explore women perception of how the feminine element is depicted by publicity. Moreover, our foundations choices appear to be consistent with previous research in Brazil. Indeed, recently, several Brazilian theorists (see for example papers in “ENANPAD” conferences in 2001 and 2002) have been employing the first two approaches in conjunction to analyze representations of gender relations in organizations (for example BOAS, NETO; CRAMER, 2001; CRAMER; BRITO; CAPPELLE, 2001). Finally, we have applied Festinger (1954) social comparison theory to support our analyses of the viewer comparison processes with images in publicity because this is the structure which has been largely employed in previous research that deals specifically with consumers comparison processes in relation to advertising images (MARTIN; KENNEDY, 1993; RICHINS, 1991; STICE; SHAW, 1994; STEPHENS; HILL; HANSON, 1994).

This article is organized in five parts. First we present a literature review on the theme. In the second section we describe the methodology adopted. Subsequently, we present the results and discuss them taking into account previous research and our framework theories. Finally, the conclusion contains the implications of our results, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review: Previous research and framework theories

The literature review is organized in two parts. The first section presents previous research related to our subject matter. As female portrayals in mass media has been investigated
in the U.S.A. for many decades we found that it was important to present a brief picture of what researchers have been investigating there. In addition, their results seem to shed light to the data of our investigation. However, we have also examined some Brazilian researches associated to our study objectives. Hence, these investigations are presented in the second module of the first section. In addition, the second section of the literature review discusses the framework theories we have selected to explain and understand our data, which are: social representation theory, gender identity approach and social comparison theory.

2.1 Previous research

2.1.1 North-American research about female images in advertising

North-American Marketing research has directed attention to female imageries in advertising since the early seventies. According to Kang (1997), previous studies 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; CANTOR, 1988; JOLLIFFE, 1989; LUEBKE, 1989).

In a study which aimed at analyzing gender images according to categories proposed by previous study (GOFFMAN, 1979), Kang (1997) found that female images, 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 North-American investigations have examined the negative social effects (commonly denominated as “unintended consequences of advertising”) of idealized portrayals in media. For example, Martin and Kennedy (1993), Richins (1991), Stice and Shaw (1994) found a positive association between idealized imagery in advertisements, self-esteem and self-image. Stephens, Hill and Hanson (1994) investigated how and with what degree advertising involving models with skin and attractive bodies were related to self-image dissatisfaction and to women dieting diseases. Nonetheless, researchers have found that this phenomenon, advertisement affecting women, can occur only if viewers do compare themselves with endorsers presented in the ads.

Furthermore, another stream of research analyzed the efficiency of modern women portrayals in advertising. Jaffe and Berger (1994), for example compared the super woman image with the equalitarian portrayal. In the first image “woman manages the demands of both job and home with little help from anyone” (Jaffe; Berger, 1994 p. 32). In the second one woman and man share the same tasks.

2.1.2 Brazilian research associated to the subject matter
We have selected three Brazilian studies to shed light to our results. The first investigation presented is Sabat’s (2001) study about gender and sexuality in publicity. The second one is Rocha (1984) investigation about idealized images 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 publicity. The other 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 publicity, 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 publicity 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). In other words, advertising portrayals work with cultural and social relations which are created in society but in the same time these images are the creator of the very same relations. The author calls the attention to the fact that meanings in publicity contents construct dominant cultural identities. In addition, according to the author, advertising imageries denounce the nature of gender relations in a given society, as well as, declaring which behaviors are “socially desired” (Sabat, 2001: 14). Furthermore, Sabat (2001) notes that the publicity has not an autonomous narrative so, in this way, it reveals the discourse of the society to which it belongs.

Indeed, Sabat (2001) findings are consistent with Rocha (1984) studies. This author, a Brazilian social anthropologist, argues that advertising dictates identity processes, life styles and reality to consumers. On the other hand, Rocha has also explored another aspect of publicity. 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. He states that advertising consist of a “idealized narratives” which shows “another life” and sells “magic solutions” (ROCHA, 1984:139). 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 Rocha (1984) “the magic world is reproduced extensively” in commercials (ROCHA, 1984:140). While, pleasure is always depicted in publicity contents, loneliness, sadness, uncomforting, diseases and exploitation seem never to exist.

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. When she happened to have any education it was related to some French, music or dance. 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. A medicine doctor, Correia de Azevedo (apud Freyre, 2003) wrote in 1872 that woman seemed to be a puppet created in Paris tailor’s
workshops and to whom society taught to overvalue clothing and other futilities in order to keep her as a docile slave of men.

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. This portrayal represents “the idealized virgin”. However, after the marriage she would become fat, deformed into a “shapeless mass”, as well as, developing larger hips. In this period of her life, she was the housekeeper and the procreator of the patriarchal family. According to Freyre (2003) these physical bodies were produced by the regime which hampered the woman in order not only to be the male’s servant, but also the “fleshy puppet”.

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 p. 213). To sum up, Freyre (2003) suggested that in the patriarchal society women were “fragile”, “beauty” and the “domestic”. They were confined in “artificial situations” in order to provide pleasure to male. In addition, it is important to emphasize that the author stated that Brazilian society has overcome race prejudices much easily than sex. In this way, women inferiority was stronger than race in Brazil.

2.2 Framework Theories

2.2.1. Social representations theory and the gender identity approach

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 mass media, in social institutions or social movements. In other words, social representations are produced during several social activities of life, such as: when people are talking to each other, when they are making speeches, receiving information from social institutions, or when cultural values of the community is being transferred to them (GUARESHI; JOVCHELOVITCH, 1995; BOAS, NETO; CRAMER, 2001).

In this context, Jovchelovitch (1995) notes that, as social representations are psychosocial phenomena, they are necessary 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 (SPINK, 1995; BOAS; NETO; CRAMER, 2001). 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. Indeed, people make use of the language collectively and not individually. Besides, the language is a powerful instrument to determine how relationships of a specific group are constituted (ORLANDI, 1996).

The social constructions theory has been applied to feminine studies (for example: SABAT, 2001; BOAS, NETO; CRAMER, 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 (MEDRADO, 1996; SCOTT, 1995). 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 images. Indeed, representations embedded in mass media 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, publicity tends to reproduce specific types of behaviors and personal values which conform with the culture of the society (SABAT, 2001).

2.2.2 Social Comparison theory

Based on the Social Comparison theory (FESTINGER, 1954) many researchers (RICHINS, 1991; GULAS; McKEAGE, 2000; MARTIN; GENTRY, 1997; THORNTON; MAURICE, 1999; LENNON, 1999) have proposed that idealized images 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 (WOOD, 1989; RICHINS, 1991). 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 (GOETHAL, 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, we have 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.

Methodological logic, procedures and data analysis

In this way, the present study was undertaken employing a qualitative method, which has an exploratory characteristic, and which is strongly recommended by the literature when the aim of the investigation is to interpret symbolic meanings given by individuals to the world and its
objects or events (SELLTIZ, WRIGHTSMAN; COOK; 1987; GODOI, 1995). More precisely, this investigation was designed to apply the grounded theory research. According to Hirschman and Thompson (1997), this method is suitable when the objective of the study is to explore consumer-based constructs. The steps of this method are as follows: 1) to apprehend key patterns or relationships in the data (commonly denominated interpretative tacking step); 2) the process of grounded reading in data. In this phase the patterns that have emerged from the data guide the researcher to literature review again in order to find theoretical constructs and frameworks conceived in previous research that can shed light on the investigation results, helping in this way, the researcher to better interpret them. 3) new analysis follows in order to link the empirical data of the study and the theoretical foundations and constructs which were selected in the literature. In this step a new frame of reference of the phenomenon is fabricated. The emerged grounded theory can be used to direct future empirical research (STRAUSS; CORBIN, 1990; HIRSCHMAN; THOMPSON, 1997).

The data was gathered using in depth interviews and semi-structured instruments. We have asked participants “how do you see women in advertising?” or “which is your perception concerning how women are portrayed in the advertisements?” 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 sample of the present study was composed of sixty individuals who were selected by convenience method. The social class scale applied to classify the participants was from Almeida and Wickerhauser proposed in 1991, which is commonly used in Brazil to operationalize the social class construct (see MATTAR, 1992 p.158-160). 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. By this criterion “A” represents the highest class (the richest and with higher level of education) and “E” represents the lowest class (the poorest and with lower level of education).

In this way, it was found that most of the people in the sample belong to class B (48%) or C (29%). The rest of the informants (22%) belongs to class A. In addition, most of the interviewees are in the 29 to 49 age group. Besides, a large number of them possesses a university degree (38%) or have studied at university without completing the course (18%). On the other hand, marital status was distributed in the following way: half of the sample is married and the other half (43%) is single. Only 6% is 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 images that depreciated women, images that idealized them and images that pictured women in a modern way. See table 1, where these three concepts are presented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPRECIATED IMAGES</th>
<th>IDEALIZED IMAGES</th>
<th>MODERN WOMEN IMAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not intelligent / irrational</td>
<td>Physically perfect: always young, beautiful, skinny and always tidy</td>
<td>Independent (from man)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Window-display: as if she were a “hanger”, a “package” or a “shelf”</td>
<td>Absence of features of Brazilian women: absence of “mulatas”, black and brown skinned women.</td>
<td>Super woman: Being able to be mother, professional, and wife at the same time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body display: high degree of nudity or with body revealing clothes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housewives</td>
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*Labels in this table were constructed based on the following criterion: to be as near as possible to what informants narrated. *(1)* Labels borrowed from previous research and that have emerged from the data. *(2)* Labels that have emerged from the data.

The label "depreciated images" 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”. We decided to use the construct “depreciated images”, because the idea of depreciation was objectively present in the informant’s speeches when describing these pictures. The other labels we have applied to summarize the informants ideas have all emerged from their speeches. However, when it was possible we opted to use 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 images related to high degree of nudity or body revealing clothes. The label “housewives” was used by Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976). “Window-display”, however, was created by us, but, again, it has emerged from the interviewees descriptions. These labels are explained in the item “depreciated images”.

Another perception reported by the interviewees is associated to the idea that images in advertising are idealized, and in this way, they are very far from their reality. We labeled these images as “idealized images” because this idea was present in all the interviewee’s answers and they are consistent with Rocha’s (1984) findings. The author stresses the idealized dimension of advertising. 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 “mulatas”, black and brown skinned women. In this picture women are blond, tall and have white skin. These labels were created by us based on the informant speeches. Each of these concepts is discussed in the item “idealized images”.

A third group of perception was that publicity 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. We labeled these images as "the modern woman". The reason to use these labels was based again in the speeches of the informants and in previous research (Jaffe; Berger, 1994). These labels are discussed in the section “modern women images”.

TABLE 1: PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE IMAGES IN ADVERTISING*
Depreciated images:
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. Why don’t advertisers show intelligent women like Marília Gabriela? It seems that the most important is a provocative body”.

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. We have decided to label these images 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 images 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 images:
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 images 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 images, 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 images and 2) the idealized images have a negative impact to their self-esteem and their own images. 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 images.”
- “…You look at yourself and demand more and more of yourself. I don’t think this is a real profile, but it is the one that is idealized all over the world, so everyone ends up wanting it”
- “I don’t think I am outside the standard, I am not that naïve. There are many women who are like me, I mean, not so slim like the models in advertising. They are too 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 mulattos. 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. Mulattas are 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 are hardly ever shown”.

**Modern Women Images**

Many interviewees understand that advertising portrayed women in a positive way. These images 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 images 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
The discussion section was designed taking into consideration three questions that follow: 1) what do our results convey? 2) How similar or how different are these results in comparison with previous research? Or, how can we relate these results to previous investigations and to our selected framework theories? 3) Which new hypothesis can be developed to explain the phenomenon investigated?

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 images without questioning them. On the contrary, they criticized and compared these images with what they used to see in their every day lives. One example of this fact is the criticism that very few images of black or “mulatas” are seen in advertisements.

In addition, previous research in the U.S.A. has found that advertising has depicted women with “clichés” images 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 images in mass media are portrayed in a stereotyped way. Hence, this investigation indicates that the same patterns of images which have been found since the mid seventies in North-American advertising permeate our informant representations of female imagery in Brazilian advertising.

It is interesting to call the attention to how the interpretations of idealized images 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 mass media, self-esteem and self-image. Indeed, many of our respondents reported not feeling comfortable with the idealized portrayals, as these images impact their self-esteem. This fact emerged from the criticisms that these images 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 images.
Indeed, in this way, it is clear that some of our 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 our 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 publicity 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 our 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 our informant’s speeches, although women are intelligent, their abilities are not explored in advertising images. Hence, messages transmitted by publicity 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 our 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, our data reveals portrayals which are impregnated by prejudice against women. This sentiment becomes apparent through the “depreciated images”. 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, we can interpret our 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 our 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, we can understand that these social representations constitute a realm where their gender identities are constructed. Moreover, according to Sabat (2001), representations embedded in publicity, not only do they reflect gender differences in the society, but also corroborate them. In this way, we can understand that the eight portrayals concocted by our informants reflect not only gender relations and identities, but also values, and behaviors which conform to Brazilian society. Besides, the eight images 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 mass media conceived femininity. However, they deny these images as their real portrayals and blame publicity for stereotyping their roles or idealizing them. However, images narrated by the informants clearly denounce a system where male dominant meanings still persist. Indeed, the depreciated and the idealized images encode allegorical meanings about how male conceive females in Brazil. Nonetheless, these two images 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 images, 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 images 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 images 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 mass media 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 publicity 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 images denounce a gender conflict in the society. Furthermore, as the interviewees deny two of the three images they perceive in publicity, 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 managers and publicity professionals can be drawn from this investigation. From our results it is clear that two images, depreciated and idealized ones, are not very popular among women interviewed. However, the third portrayal is appreciated by them. In this way, publicity which targets women should be designed applying images which they feel comfortable with. The success of advertisements also depends, among other things, on the fact that consumers can identify with portrayals shown to them. Likewise, publicity planners should analyze how male symbolic meanings about female roles dominate images in mass media. Furthermore, they should encourage society to decrease gender conflicts and not stimulate its perpetuation.

For those responsible for social policies the results of this work suggest that Brazilian women feel uncomfortable with the predominant images conveyed by mass media and that they would like to see pictures which reflect the new identity that they are striving to forge in the Brazilian society. On the other hand, social workers should be attempted to the fact that gender relation conflicts still represent a strong social problem in Brazilian society.

In addition, this investigation contributes with researchers interested in studying negative social effects of idealized portrayals in media because it has shown that the informants did compare themselves with advertising endorsers. Indeed, this is the first step to explore negative social effects of advertising imagery, because mass media can affect viewers only if they do compare themselves to endorsers presented in it.

As to any research, this study has limitations that also suggest possibilities for future investigative endeavor. For instance, future research could see into the subject in a quantitative approach. In addition, experimental studies 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 images can examine advertisements using content analysis and comparing them with women’s perceptions.

**Bibliography**