



Gender-role stereotypes in integrated social marketing communication: Influence on attitudes towards the ad



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of stereotyped gender-role depictions on attitudes towards integrated social marketing communication (ISMC) through an application of Gender-Role Theory and the Stereotype Content Model. One hundred and seventy five participants completed surveys measuring their cognitive and affective attitudes towards four advertisements that varied in gender-role congruency (congruent/incongruent) and stereotype content (paternalistic/contemptuous). The advertisements targeted male perpetrated partner violence (congruent/contemptuous); female perpetrated partner violence (incongruent/contemptuous); regretful sex experienced by a female (congruent/paternalistic); and regretful sex experienced by a male (incongruent/paternalistic). Findings revealed cognitive attitudes were more favorable when the gender of the depicted character and target behavior were consistent with gender-role stereotypes. Affective attitudes varied as a function of stereotype content. Participants' affective attitudes were more favorable towards advertisements depicting paternalistic behavior compared to contemptuous behavior. The findings question the role of affective attitudes in evaluating ISMC advertisements and raise ethical questions regarding social marketing.

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1. Introduction

Social marketing is a popular public health tool that employs marketing techniques with the intention of achieving socially desirable outcomes (Donovan, 2011). Social marketers target a variety of behaviors including physical exercise, immunization, breastfeeding, and healthy eating. As social marketing increases so too does the range of issues being addressed (Grier and Bryant, 2005), and, as a result, mass media advertisements promoted to the public through integrated social marketing communication (ISMC; Alden et al., 2011), have targeted behaviors that are inconsistent with predominant stereotyped beliefs of gender appropriate behavior. For example, the “One in Three Campaign” that ran in Australia targeted violence by women against men (One in Three Campaign); challenging widely held societal beliefs that intimate partner violence (IPV) is predominantly a male behavior. Furthermore, the use of campaigns to target female perpetrated violence is likely to increase. Recent recommendations for improving social marketing campaigns targeting IPV included addressing a more diverse range of violent behaviors and the inclusion of females depicted as perpetrators and males as victims (Cismaru et al., 2010).

Empirical research examining public response to depictions challenging stereotyped beliefs is lacking, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that public response to these ads may be counter-intuitive. For example, in response to the “stop violence against men” campaign, members of the public posted numerous parody advertisements on popular social media sites (e.g., YouTube), depicting violence against men as humorous. Such humorous responses oppose the fundamental aim of social marketing by trivializing the seriousness of the problem behavior and raise ethical concerns surrounding the effectiveness of mass media ISMC advertisements.

The present empirical study examines attitudes towards ISMC targeting behaviors that are incongruent with predominant stereotyped gender-role beliefs. Specifically, we examined students' attitudes towards ISMC targeting IPV and ISMC targeting regretful sex and for both target behaviors we portrayed two ads, one with a male protagonist and the other with a female protagonist. Past research has shown both behaviors to be prevalent and of concern amongst student samples. For instance, Robertson and Murachver (2007) found one-in-four male and female New Zealand university students had perpetrated IPV within the past year. Furthermore, a high prevalence of IPV amongst student samples is evident across the western world. Straus (2004) reported a high incidence of IPV perpetrated by male and female students within 16 different countries, with the median number of students perpetrating IPV in one

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year across universities being 29%. Regretful sex is also a predominant behavior amongst university students. McGee and Kypri (2004) found 18% of males and 14.7% of female university students in New Zealand experienced regretful sex over a three-month period.

1.1. Background

The influence of gender-role stereotypes on the effectiveness of advertising has been of considerable interest for the past 30 years. However, the focus of research has been limited to commercial advertising, female stereotypes, and traditional roles (e.g., men as businessmen and women as homemakers). There is a dearth of research examining the influence of gender-role depictions in ISMC or examining attitudes towards the diverse range of gendered behaviors targeted by social marketing. Furthermore, research findings on the influence of stereotypes in commercial marketing have been equivocal. One stream of research emphasizes the importance of gender-role congruency on attitudes, although discrepancies in research findings exist within this stream. For instance, Orth and Holančova (2003–4) found portrayals consistent with gender-role beliefs elicited more approval while inconsistent portrayals elicited disapproving responses to the advertisement. Conversely, Jaffe and Berger (1994) found attitudes were more favorable in response to a non-traditional female gender-role portrayal than a traditional female role portrayal.

A more recent stream of research emphasizes the importance of the content of the stereotype on attitudes towards the ad. Zawisza and Cinnirella (2010) found cognitive and affective attitudes towards the ad were more favorable when the depicted behavior was warm (e.g., homemaker) regardless of whether the behavior was congruent or incongruent with the gender of the depicted character. The present study builds on the stereotyping literature by examining the influence of stereotype congruency and stereotype content within the context of ISMC. Two theoretical explanations are tested, namely, gender-role theory (GRT; Eagly and Karau, 2002) and the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002).

1.2. Theoretical foundation

GRT (Eagly and Karau, 2002) emphasizes the importance of gender-role congruency on attitudes. According to GRT, individuals evaluate male and female behavior negatively if the behavior is incongruent with stereotyped gender-role beliefs (e.g., Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2005). GRT has implications for advertising effectiveness, predicting that individuals will evaluate advertisements depicting gender-role congruent behaviors more positively than they will advertisements depicting gender-role incongruent roles.

SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) states that not all stereotypes are equal and the content of the stereotype influences emotional responses to the stereotype. Specifically, stereotypes vary along two core dimensions, warmth and competence, and it is the combination of warmth and competence that influences affective responses. When people perceive someone as warm but incompetent (e.g., stereotypical representations of elderly people), this is *paternalistic prejudice*. When individuals are perceived as paternalistic, they are viewed as unlikely to harm others, and accordingly elicit feelings of pity and sympathy. When people perceive high competence groups that are low in warmth, they feel envious prejudice and believe the group has negative intentions towards others. Groups that are high in both warmth and competence are *admired*. Groups perceived as neither warm nor competent (e.g., welfare recipients) are shown *contempt* and thus, they are viewed with anger and distrust (Fiske et al., 2002).

The present study examines how gender-role congruency and stereotype content (SCM) influence attitudes towards ISMC

targeting two behaviors, namely IPV and regretful sex, amongst a student sample. The targeted behaviors are social issues of concern amongst student samples, have been the subject of previous ISMC campaigns, and are perceived typically as gendered. Specifically, IPV is perceived stereotypically to be more likely to be perpetrated by a male than a female whereas regretful sex is stereotypically perceived to be more likely to be experienced by a female than a male, thus the targeted behaviors enabled the examination of GRT. A manipulation check also revealed the behaviors varied in perceived warmth and competence. IPV was perceived to be contemptuous, regretful sex was perceived to be paternalistic, and thus the targeted behaviors were acceptable for examining SCM¹. In addition, an ad communicating the need to balance social and academic life was employed as a neutral, non-gendered control behavior to examine attitudes towards the ad in the absence of gendered depictions or contemptuous and paternalistic behavior.

Past research has typically measured attitudes towards the ad by examining affective and cognitive responses together. However, researchers have recognized for some time that the two constructs are distinctly different (Brown and Stayman, 1992; Edell and Burke, 1987; Park and Young, 1986). Therefore, we examined the two constructs separately in the present study. Affective attitudes are defined as an “emotional component, reflecting the feelings which individuals experience when exposed to an advertisement” and cognitive attitudes are defined as an “evaluative component which expresses the individual’s opinion about the quality of the advertisement” (Beerli and Santana, 1999, p. 15).

To enable the manipulation of congruency and stereotype content we developed two versions of each advertisement, one with a female character and one with a male character for each targeted behavior. Gender-role theory and SCM predict different attitudinal outcomes as a function of gender-role stereotype. According to GRT, attitudes towards the ad will be more positive when the targeted behaviors are congruent with rather than incongruent with the depicted characters expected gender that would confirm the gender-role stereotype. SCM predicts affective attitudes will be more positive towards paternalistic stereotypes rather than contemptuous stereotypes. Furthermore, Zawisza and Cinnirella’s (2010) findings suggest that the relationship between attitudes and gender-role beliefs and attitudes and stereotype content differs between cognitive and affective attitudes. Specifically, they found cognitive attitudes varied as a function of congruency; however, affective attitudes did not and both cognitive and affective attitudes varied as a function of stereotype content. Building on the work by Zawisza and Cinnirella (2010), we formed hypothesis 1 to test GRT and hypothesis 2 to examine SCM:

H1a. Cognitive attitudes will be more positive when the behavior and gender of the depicted character are congruent with expected gender stereotypes (female regretful sex ad; male partner violence ad) compared to when they are incongruent with expected gender stereotypes (male regretful sex ad; female partner violence ad).

H1b. Affective attitudes will not vary as a function of congruency.

H2a. Affective and cognitive attitudes will be more positive towards advertisements depicting paternalistic behavior (regretful sex) compared to contemptuous behavior (partner violence).

¹ An independent student sample ($n = 34$) rated the two experimental behaviors for competence and warmth using a five point scale where “1 = not at all” to “5 = extremely”. A paired samples t -test showed regretful sex was perceived to be significantly warmer ($M = 3.00$) than IPV ($M = 1.9$, $t(33) = -6.38$, $p < .000$), and the two behaviors were perceived to be similarly low in competence ($M_{\text{partner violence}} = 2.18$, $M_{\text{regretful sex}} = 2.62$, $t(34) = -1.97$, $p < .05$). Thus, the manipulation check revealed IPV to be perceived as contemptuous (low in both warmth and competence) and regretful sex to be perceived as paternalistic (low in competence but not warmth).

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