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**Abstract:** The paper presents the first results of a systematic and in-depth survey on about 8000 advertisements appeared from February to December 2013, and attempts to identify and characterize the gender stereotypes which can be found in them. Having conducted one of the first semiotic investigations on such an extended corpus, the authors also draw some general conclusions on the possibility, for the contemporary semiotic discipline, to handle not only single texts and small corpora, as it has usually and traditionally been done, but also very large text corpora, such as those which today either the Internet or any other digital repository makes available to academic and scientific research.

**Keywords:** Advertising, gender stereotypes, gender studies, semiotics of advertising, text semiotics.

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# How Italian Advertising Represents Women and Men. Towards a Methodology for the Semiotic Analysis of Stereotypes

GIOVANNA COSENZA, JENNIFER COLOMBARI & ELISA GASPARRI<sup>1</sup>

## 1. *Birth of This Research*

This work is a new take and a re-elaboration of a survey that was carried out between March 2013 and early 2014. In the survey, we systematically examined, catalogued and organized in various categories approximately 8000 advertising campaigns that had been freely made available to us for research purposes by Nielsen Italia.<sup>2</sup> It was composed of more than a thousand TV advertisements and TV spots broadcasted in February 2013, and around 7000 full advertising campaigns, including spots, radio ads, billboards, press releases, and banners, all released in December 2013. The goal of the survey was to describe in the most neutral and objective way (i.e. setting aside evaluations, impressions and prejudices from the researchers) how Italian advertising represents human beings (women, men and children of both genders). We took into account the subjects' facial expressions, gaits, clothing, social and professional settings (and corresponding gender stereotypes related to said settings), as well as the plots they are involved in, suggest, or implicitly imply.

The concept of the project included the identification of the main *stereotypes* through which the Italian advertising industry represents human beings, in order to assess differences between men and women. In other words, the purpose was to look for *gender stereotypes* for the reasons and goals that we will address here.

The original team conceived an initial core methodology that would be used to divide advertisements into various categories. Said methodology was subsequently re-elaborated, completed, and defined in semiotic terms, as we will explain here. The original team also included members other than the authors of this article. Most of the members of the team, incidentally, did not hail from formal academia, but were instead renowned Italian company professionals with more than 30 years of experience in advertising. We deemed that the most effective way to carry out academic research on contemporary advertising (with any methodology and discipline, including semiotics), was to do so with people who have worked in the advertising industry for many years either personally and/or through agencies or associations that deal with advertising as part of their activities. Direct and continuous collaboration with sector professionals may indeed prevent naivety and abstractions that are common in academics who study advertising without considering the specific contexts of production, on one hand, and advertisement reception on the other. One may not solely analyze advertising texts in a vacuum without taking into account how advertising agencies work, how companies invest in communication, the trends of the market according to the period (development, crisis, recession), how reception surveys work, the opinion on campaigns, products and brands (market research, questionnaire distribution, focus groups) and so forth (Testa 2000, 2003).

The original team that systematically examined, catalogued and categorized around one thousand advertising campaigns released in February 2013 by Nielsen Italia) was composed of (in alphabetical order):

(1) Giovanna Cosenza, co-author of this article;

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this article together elaborated and discussed all aspects of the research from which this article is taken, as well as all parts thereof. However, they opted to divide the drafting of this article as follows: Giovanna Cosenza wrote §1, §2, and §5, Jennifer Colombari wrote §3, and Elisa Gasparri §4. An Italian version of this paper appeared with the title "Come la pubblicità italiana rappresenta le donne e gli uomini. Verso una metodologia di analisi semiotica degli stereotipi," *Versus* 123, no. 2, (2016): 323-362.

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to thank Nielsen Italia, and the Nielsen Italia Advertising Business Director Alberto Dal Sasso, in particular, for granting free access to the company advertising database for the duration of the research.

- (2) Massimo Guastini, Chairperson of the Italian Art Directors Club (Adci), the most important and largest Italian advertising and communication professional association, as well as creative director and partner of advertising and communication firm CookiesAdv in Milan;<sup>3</sup>
- (3) Vincenzo Guggino, Secretary General of the Advertising Self-Regulation Institute (Iap), an association that has overseen and regulated advertising in Italy since 1966 to ensure fair and transparent communication that benefits consumers and promotes fair competition between companies;
- (4) Giovanna Maggioni, Director General of Associated Advertisement Users (Upa), an association that includes the leading industrial, trade and service companies that invest in advertising and communication in Italy;
- (5) Annamaria Testa, advertising professional, writer, founder, and owner of the Milan-based advertising and communication firm Progetti Nuovi;
- (6) Lorella Zanardo, activist, writer, and co-author (with Cesare Cantù and Marco Malfi Chindemi) of the 2009 documentary *Il corpo delle donne* (*The body of women*). The documentary explores the topic of the commodification of the female body by Italian media outlets through a selection of images from TV programs.<sup>4</sup>

The original team assessed a thousand television advertisements and spots in February 2013 and drafted the methodology adopted here.<sup>5</sup> Massimo Guastini, along with the authors of this article, also systematically monitored around 7000 complete advertising campaigns from 2013 and the elaboration of the intermediate phase of methodology, by which we analyzed and categorized these advertisements. Guastini summarized this process in the paper *Come la pubblicità racconta le donne e gli uomini, in Italia* (*How Italian Advertising Describes Men and Women in Italy*), which was presented to the Italian Parliament Lower Chamber on November 18, 2014 during the “Rosa Shocking” event, organized by the non-profit developmental cooperation WeWorld Intervita.<sup>6</sup>

In synthesis, the purpose of the research group was to answer these two crucial questions:

- (1) What are the most frequent female and male stereotypes in Italian advertising?
- (2) How much did Italian companies invest, in the months under examination, to support and disseminate these stereotypes through advertising?

The goal was to offer agencies, advertising professionals, and Italian companies that that invest in advertising as broad, representative, and objective a picture as possible of the expenditure in Italy that supports, sustains and circulates *gender stereotypes*. Gender stereotypes, as described in greater detail in §2, are predictable, trite, repetitive representations of men and women, of their desires and actions, of their professions, their clothing choices, their physique,

<sup>3</sup> Massimo Guastini was President of the Italian Art Directors Club (Adci) from late 2010 to February 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The documentary *Il corpo delle donne* (*The body of women*) may be viewed online, free of charge. Lorella Zanardo, Marco Malfi Chindemi, and Cesare Cantù, “Video/Documentario,” *Il corpo delle donne*, July 23, 2009. Web. Accessed 28 August 2017. <http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/documentario>. See also Lorella Zanardo, *Il corpo delle donne* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The initial methodological decisions included issues such as: what software tools should be used (Microsoft Excel was selected), how to connect remotely to the Nielsen Italia database, the division of work among the participants in the research, how to avoid influencing participants in describing advertisements and formulating hypotheses on stereotypes, how and when to discuss together the results of each observation, how to name each stereotype category to avoid value implications in the name, how to optimize everyone’s time (remote work, individual work, number of meetings etc.), and so forth.

<sup>6</sup> Massimo Guastini, *Come la pubblicità racconta le donne e gli uomini, in Italia* (CookiesAdv, 2014). Web. Accessed 28 August 2017. <https://giovannacosenza.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/come-la-pubblicitacc80-racconta-gli-italiani.pdf>.

Also note that, between March and December 2013, Massimo Guastini systematically observed campaigns that appeared between June 18 and August 2, 2013 and from November 4 to November 30, 2013, in order to test the partitioning of the stereotypes that had emerged from the work on spots and TV advertisements in February 2013. When we include these monitoring activities in the intermediate months, the overall observation accounts for approximately 23,000 campaigns in Italy from February to December 2013.

as opposed to more innovative representations or representations that are more consistent with what real people do in their everyday life. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to take the pulse of creativity in Italian advertising. In recent years several observers – academics and Italian advertising professionals alike – have in fact lamented the scarcity or outright lack of said creativity. Indeed, how can a flat reiteration of stereotypes ever be considered creative?<sup>7</sup>

These two initial objectives were thus the starting point of our overall research. The survey carried out by the authors of this paper focused, however, more on the first of these two questions, as we will illustrate in the following paragraphs.

## 2. Why Gender Stereotypes?

As previously mentioned, we started with the goal of identifying the main stereotypes through which the Italian advertising industry portrays human beings. Additionally, we intended to assess whether there were significant differences between the stereotypes related to women and those related to men. The reasons that steered our research this way can be summarized as follows:

(1) In the sociological and media studies on advertising and mass media, the concept of stereotype is often used with a negative connotation, in order to highlight the gap between reality and everyday life, on one hand, and what advertising and media represent, on the other. The word *stereotype* derives from ancient Greek *stereós*, meaning *rigid*, and *typos*, meaning *print*. It was first used in the seventeenth century in the circles of French typography to describe the reproduction of images with print from fixed shapes. In the nineteenth century the concept was introduced to the social sciences by the US journalist Walter Lippmann in his seminal work on public opinion, of which the entire third chapter was dedicated to stereotypes.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the concept has been a prerogative of social sciences, including sociology, political science, social psychology and mass communication studies. When applied to social sciences, from Lippman onward, the concept of stereotype indicates a rigid and simplified set of beliefs that *a certain social group* shares and reenacts (as if it were a print, a *typos*) regarding a subject, a state of things, an event, a behavior or *another social group*, that is considered monolithic and without exceptions, with no in depth considerations or critical reasoning on possible differences or nuances within that group.<sup>9</sup> This definition describes the functioning of stereotypes concerning *national characteristics*, according to which, for example, Germans are allegedly “cold and rational,” French are “snobs,” and Italians are “great lovers.” It also accounts for other types of stereotypes concerning *professions*, which would see engineers as “rigid,” teachers as “pedantic,” and so on. Finally, it accounts for *gender stereotypes* regarding women, men, gay people (as well as other sexual orientations), that would have women as “motherly,” “more emotional than men,” “less inclined to scientific studies,” while men would be “more capable of controlling their emotions,” “less inclined to caregiving,” and gay people “touchy” but “sensitive,” and so forth.

The set of beliefs that forms a stereotype is the cognitive base to the formulation of *prejudices* or *pre-emptive, pre-liminary* judgements, i.e., opinions that precede direct experience of the person who is formulating them and that are not based on sufficient empirical data. Sometimes these prejudices are positive: e.g., *Italians are generous people* (a positive assessment); sometimes are neutral: e.g., *Italians are welcoming* (an assessment that may be perceived as neutral, that is neither positive nor negative); however, they are most frequently negative: e.g., *Italians are unreliable and dishonest*. Prejudices that carry negative evaluations may lead to discrimination, sometimes dire, against the entire social group that they target.

<sup>7</sup> See, amongst others: Giovanna Cosenza “Batti e ribatti, la stessa pubblicità,” *Rivista Il Mulino* 1/11, LX, no. 453 (2011); Paolo Iabichino *Invertising* (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2014); Guastini.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922)

<sup>9</sup> Bruno Mazzara, *Stereotipi e pregiudizi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

(2) The concept of *stereotype* is widespread in common sense, i.e., the set of average competences that form the shared and common *encyclopedia* of our culture.<sup>10</sup> In these instances, the stereotype is mainly used in its negative connotation, to remark the scarce and therefore undesirable adherence to reality of images, words, beliefs and opinions. Some examples include: “You may think that I’m a stereotypical professor, but I’m not” as one would say to distance himself pre-emptive expectations of professors in general, which we presume to be negative; “Frank is strongly empathic, which you wouldn’t expect from someone born and raised in Germany,” signals that Frank differs from the stereotype of Germans that sees them cold and unsympathetic. It is thus evident that there is not a substantial difference between the ordinary use of the concept of stereotype and its usage in social sciences, that had the merit of considering common sense and accounting for it explicitly and systematically.

(3) The European Parliament passed a resolution that simultaneously takes for granted that advertising conveys stereotypes and invites member countries to fight these stereotypes, as they are harbingers of social discrimination. This resolution, called “How marketing and advertising affects equality between women and men,” was approved by the European Parliament on September 3, 2008.<sup>11</sup> The resolution highlights that gender stereotypes should be eliminated from advertising as well as from all other media (videogames, computer games, internet, and digital media), and from schoolbooks and toys for girls and boys alike.

This resolution focuses mainly on advertising since, among the various preambles of the resolution, the following stand out:

1. whereas advertising and marketing reflect culture, and also contribute to its creation,
2. whereas advertising is a component part of the market economy and one of the aspects of reality with which everyone is confronted in daily life,
3. whereas responsible advertising can have a positive influence over society's perceptions of issues such as 'body image,' 'gender roles,' and 'normality,'
4. whereas advertising can be an effective tool in challenging and tackling stereotypes<sup>12</sup>

The resolution then continues with several recommendations and acknowledgements:

The European Parliament:

[...]

3. Notes that further research would help elucidate any link between gender stereotyping in advertising and gender inequality;

4. Calls on the Council, Commission and Member States to exploit, and disseminate, the aforementioned research and results thereof,

[...]

9. Calls on the Member States to study and report on the image of women and men in advertising and marketing;

[...]

16. Notes the need to conduct continuous training for and in collaboration with media professionals, and awareness training for society on the negative effects of gender stereotypes;

[...]

24. Emphasises the need for an ongoing debate on marketing and advertising and their role in creating and perpetuating gender stereotypes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. La cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrative* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979); Eco, *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio* (Torino: Einaudi, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament, *How marketing and advertising affects equality between women and men* (Brussels: 2008). Web. Accessed 28 August, 2017. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0401+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. These are items E, F, G, Q of the resolution.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, special emphasis is given to the respect and dignity of the person and to the fact that all advertising and marketing that foster discriminations whether based on gender, age, ethnicity, religion, race, personal opinions, or disability should be avoided. Furthermore, the European Parliament:

19. Calls on the Member States to ensure by appropriate means that marketing and advertising guarantee respect for human dignity and the integrity of the person, are neither directly nor indirectly discriminatory nor contain any incitement to hatred based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation, and do not contain material which, judged in its context, sanctions, promotes or glamorizes violence against women.<sup>14</sup>

(4) In semiotics, there is no clear cut and univocal representation of the concept of stereotype as it is used in ordinary language and in social sciences. A semiotic equivalent of the concept of stereotype may surely be seen as a subset of Eco's *encyclopedia* that deals with *average shared competences* in a specific socio-cultural milieu and in a set moment in history.<sup>15</sup> According to Eco, these competences may be represented and organized, through semiotic analysis, in *common scripts*.

A *common script* according to Eco is the description of "an action pattern and predetermined behavior" in a *standard* or *typical* situation of everyday life (in this sense it is *common*).<sup>16</sup> Such events may include going to the movies, shopping at a supermarket, taking a train, eating a pizza, typing on a computer, and so forth. All these situations are ordinary and, we may assume, are shared by the majority of people who experience a certain culture in a specific timeframe and belong to the middle class. It is a concept of *social and cultural averageness* that semiotics does not interpret in post-hoc statistical terms – as the social quantitative analysis does when it calculates statistical averages or samples statistically relevant samples. The semiotic approach is thus an *a priori* analytical and conceptual analysis, in that what is "typical," "common," and "standard" in a certain culture, in a specific period, and in a set social group, is obtained from the observation of the researcher of a textual corpus that is deemed as relevant, coherent and sufficient for the purpose of that analysis.

We are not suggesting that Eco's concept of *common script* equates to the sociological notion of stereotype, but we are stating that it can serve as its foundation. Indeed, average common scripts, through their continuous reiteration, *may become* rigid to the point they become stereotypes (i.e., rigid and repetitive molds, as the etymology suggests). As such, they may foster prejudices that are negative, if not discriminatory, to the social group they target.

Additionally, the Greimas notion of *thematic role* may be seen as a semiotic counterpart to the stereotype as envisaged by both ordinary language and social sciences.<sup>17</sup> A thematic role is a *standard character* with recurrent characteristics that are known in a certain narrative genre. These characteristics may be confirmed or denied in a specific text, but they still form an expectational backdrop through which we read and interpret said text. Examples of this include a king, a prince, a fairytale princess, a murder mystery detective, the bad boy in a romantic novel, and so forth. Therefore, the thematic role shares *reiteration* and a certain *rigidity* in storytelling with stereotype to the point that we can call it *narrative stereotype*. As Greimas and Courtés point out:

The thematic role is what subsumes, from the point of view of virtual agents, a specific thematic journey (for example, the /lover/, the /villain/, the /righteous/) etc. [...]. Thus, unlike what happens in Proppian tales where thematic journeys of actors are completely compliant to their

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Eco, 1979; 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Eco, 1984: 70. Our translation.

<sup>17</sup> Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette, 1979).

See entries "role," "theme," and "thematic."

role (to the point where they are called “father,” “son,” “king,” etc., evangelical texts enact from the beginning social, religious and familiar roles. As the narration develops, they are “re-categorized” thematically to pursue their actual essence rather than their outward appearance.<sup>18</sup>

(5) In this paper we illustrate the methodology that we used to identify and describe gender stereotypes in advertising campaigns of our corpus (§3). Additionally, we assess the quantitative and qualitative results obtained (§§4-5). We describe the various categories of stereotypes as they have emerged from our work (qualitative results) and we specify, in each category, what percentage of the entire corpus that specific stereotype accounts for (quantitative analysis).

With this we intend to: (i) show concretely, i.e., through the use of a defined text corpus, how the concept of stereotype in ordinary language and social sciences may be treated in semiotic terms; (ii) account for the *recursive nature* and *rigidity* of stereotypes as reiteration of semantic marks that may be detected through the analysis of a corpus; (iii) offer a useful contribution to the “reports on imagery of women and men in advertising and marketing” that the 2008 European Parliament resolution called for; (iv) lay the foundations of a methodology that may also be applied, more generally, to texts outside advertising, including mass media pictures used in newspapers, magazines, website or TV news, TV features, as well as images employed by companies in their communication tools (brochures, catalogues, websites), and stock photos that can be purchased in mass digital archives such as Getty Images.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Methodology

Semiotics has a long standing and consolidated experience in the analysis of single advertising texts – especially press advertisements and TV spots – and of advertisement corpora spanning a single ad campaign or a limited number thereof: two or three, up to ten in very few instances.<sup>20</sup>

Analysis of text corpora of 100, 500 and 1000 or, in our case, several thousands of advertisements, however, is lacking in semiotic studies. The reasons for this are twofold: on one hand, extending the analytic level of detail that semiotics dedicates to a single text to tens, hundreds or thousands of texts is unthinkable, and may be off-putting to many semiologists. On the other hand, we rarely can have access to a database that is as vast, updated and comprehensive as the one we were fortunate to access thanks to Nielsen Italia, which makes a quantitatively massive analysis such as ours a rare occurrence.

The first issue that we had to tackle was therefore to adapt what had been a mainly qualitative methodology, such as the one commonly used in semiotic studies on advertising, to a corpus comprising thousands of texts. The fact that we were looking for stereotypes regarding *human figures* did simplify our task (at least in part). In Greimas-inspired *visual semiotics* the acknowledgement of a *natural world image* of whatever type (a girl, a man, a house, a flower, a street, the sea, etc.) automatically implies: (i) the perception thereof; (ii) the naming thereof in a language (in our case, English); (iii) the attribution of a meaning to that name.<sup>21</sup> This is the core of the matter: since the “natural world” quoted by Greimas is the “world of common sense,” the

<sup>18</sup> Greimas and Courtés, 353-354. Our translation.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgia Aiello, “Fra abiezione e stilizzazione. Corpi femminili, corpi lesbici e corpi *queer* nella comunicazione visiva globale,” *AG About Gender – Rivista internazionale di Studi di Genere* 2, no. 3 (2013); “Generiche differenze. La comunicazione visiva della soggettività lesbica nell’archivio fotografico Getty Images,” *Studi culturali* X, no. 3 (2013).

<sup>20</sup> The bibliography on semiotics in advertising is vast. A number of studies (in chronological order) have been useful to our research team: Eugeni, Fumagalli (eds.) (1999), Volli (2003), Bianchi (2005), Manetti (2006), Saba (2006), Marrone (2007), Traini (2008), Finocchi (ed.) (2009), Pozzato (2013). Please refer to our works cited page for full references.

<sup>21</sup> Algirdas Julien Greimas, “Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique,” *Actes sémiotiques. Documents* VI, no. 60 (1984): 5.24.; Piero Polidoro *Che cos’è la semiotica visiva* (Roma: Carocci, 2008); Maria Pia Pozzato *Capire la semiotica*, (Roma: Carocci, 2013): Chapter 7.

very attribution of common names to images of the natural world that we recognize in advertising texts (in our case, women and men), the act of describing in our language who they are (“a mother,” “a husband,” “a model” and so forth), their appearance (“she is beautiful, black-haired, voluptuous,” “he dresses casually, he’s sexy and smart”), what they do in the context in which we see them (“she’s hugging a baby,” “he’s smiling to her partner,” “she’s looking into the camera”) are all operations that are invariably based on the average encyclopedic competence that is the foundation of the creation of stereotypes.<sup>22</sup> In other terms, describing in detail and analytically the *figurative formants* that we recognize in a printed advertisement, a billboard, a TV spot or a banner – what Pozzato calls “dense description” – already implies that a first hypothesis on stereotypes that these features express has been formulated.<sup>23</sup> Said hypothesis will then be verified on other texts of the corpus and will be accounted for in percentage of times that said stereotype occurs in the corpus.

Therefore, we:

- (1) selected only advertisements that included human figures, specifically excluding ads where they were not depicted;
- (2) observed and analytically described in detail (“dense description”) the human beings depicted in the various texts: faces, facial expressions, bodies, clothing, postures, and the relationships between them and the context in which they were put;
- (3) analyzed semiotically and semantically the verbal texts paired with each *visual* or each spot; all advertisements are “syncretic texts,” i.e., they include a visual part and a verbal part, and they together convey the entirety of the advertising message;<sup>24</sup>
- (4) formulated, drafted and archived in our database a preliminary hypothesis on each gender stereotype that each advertising text conveyed.<sup>25</sup>

The second crucial issue that we faced was the organization into categories of the stereotypes on which we were formulating hypotheses. With the term *category* we intend a “general typology that may group together concept on a logical basis.”<sup>26</sup>

In the history of western thought, the issue of categorization has been tackled mainly in three ways.<sup>27</sup> The first is the so-called “hierarchical classification,” which dates back to Aristoteles. In this type of categorization, the classification is carried out in binary pairs with a tree-like organization, from genres to species.<sup>28</sup> The second classification is the so-called “combinatory” classification that is based on the aforementioned classification, but it allows “for some disjunctions to be at the same time in several branches of the definition tree.”<sup>29</sup> In this case “the classification is carried out by means of one or more parameters, each of which envisages two or more categories.”<sup>30</sup> The third type of categorization is the “typology” classification, which

<sup>22</sup> Greimas and Courtés. See entry “natural world.”

<sup>23</sup> Pozzato, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Greimas and Courtés. See entries “syncretic,” and semiotic.”

In advertising lexicon, the *visual* is the image that appears in printed advertisements and billboards. It is considered independently of written texts that appear with it (headline, baseline, payoff, bodycopy, etc.). For additional information on advertising lexicon, see Annamaria Testa *La parola immaginata* (Milano: Pratiche Editrice 2000).

<sup>25</sup> We managed the database through Microsoft Excel. For each advertisement, a field specified the company, one the brand and the third contained the remote link to the advertisement in the Nielsen Italia database. To these fields, we then added fields containing various semantic traits, whether they were present or absent.

<sup>26</sup> Claudio Gnoli, Vittorio Marino, and Luca Rosati, *Organizzare la conoscenza: dalle biblioteche all'architettura dell'informazione per il web*, (Milano: Hops Tecniche nuove, 2006): 23. Our translation. This concept of category is shared by many disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, linguistics and social sciences. It closely resembles that of common sense, but it should not be confused with the semiotic concept of category as defined by Greimas, which refers to the relationship between opposite meanings and is developed in a semiotic square.

<sup>27</sup> Polidoro, “Teoria dei generi e siti web,” *Versus*, no 94 (2003): 95-96.

<sup>28</sup> Umberto Eco, 1983. “L’antiporfirio,” in, *Il pensiero debole*, eds. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Polidoro, 2008: 213. Our translation.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

is based on *fuzzy logic* and *prototype semantics*, as we will see later. In this case, the categories are described as a non-rigidly predefined set of defining semantic traits, the pertinent properties that are used to decide the allocation of an item in a specific category vary among the categories. The allocation of an item into a category envisages intermediate allocations, and does not follow a binary logic (either in or out of a category), i.e., the same item may belong to various categories according to different traits.

In order to define our categories, we followed this last criterion, as it was the only one that enabled us to manage what we identified as “dubious instances.” Let us for example imagine the analysis of an advertisement where a woman in working attire (for instance a uniform) is carrying a baby. A rigid and binary categorization would force us to enter the image either under the category of “mother” (§4.5) or that of “professional woman” (§4.8), without allowing this woman to be part of both categories, albeit with different degrees of affiliation.

Furthermore, this categorization of advertising may be akin to the *componential analysis of meaning*, on one hand, and to the *prototype semantics* on the other.<sup>31</sup> In linguistics, the componential analysis is “based on the idea that the meaning of each term may be analyzed through a set of components of sense or properties of more general order, some of which may be shared by various terms of the lexicon.”<sup>32</sup> During a componential analysis, the meaning of each term is broken down into traits or more general meaning components, i.e., that may be attributed to the meaning of other terms as well.

The concept of *prototype* is not a production of linguistic and philosophical studies, but of cognitive psychology. In psychology literature, Eleanor Rosch first introduced it in the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> The prototype is the “best example, the most representative case of each category.”<sup>34</sup> Subsequent to its introduction, it has been used by Violi’s encyclopedic and experiential semantics, to account for the gradual way in which meanings are organized inside a category according to the amount of semantic traits that they share with what is perceived as the best example of the category. The notion of prototype must obviously not be confused with the concept of stereotype as seen in §2: the prototype includes a perceptive and experiential component that may not be present in stereotypes, as stereotypes can be – and indeed often are – completely *abstract*, in the sense that they are independent of any direct experience. In our instance, however, this difference, while crucial from a theoretical and conceptual perspective, is less relevant, since all the stereotypes in advertisement are (also) conveyed via images (i.e., they are *visual stereotypes*), and as such they are perceived or they can be perceived at least.

An example of how we transformed the stereotype deriving from the classification of the female figure as both “mother” and “professional woman” into an actual category is Figure 1. A well-groomed woman with elegant attire that may be suitable for professional activities is holding a newborn while walking away from a plane that we may reasonably assume has just landed.

The image conveys that the woman is probably an upper-class high-ranking professional, who is often on business trips. This preliminary meaning may, at first glance, frame this female image into the stereotype of the “professional woman” (§4.8). However, on a deeper analysis, the semantic trait of “motherhood” is repeated more frequently than that of “professional.” This may be perceived both in the visual and in the verbal parts: the headline reads “Amor di mamma” (“mommy’s sweetheart”), the baseline is “Il gioiello dedicato alla maternità” (“the jewel dedicated to motherhood”), and the advertised product is a pendant with a silhouette of a woman carrying a newborn. All these elements seem to indicate that the semantic area leans

<sup>31</sup> Patrizia Violi, *Significato ed esperienza*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1997), Chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> Violi, 81. Our translation.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Rosch “Natural categories,” *Cognitive Psychology*, no. 4 (1973): 328-350.; “Human categorization,” in *Advances in Cross-cultural Psychology*, ed. Neil Warren (New York: Academic Press, 1977); “Principles of categorization,” in *Cognition and Categorization*, eds. Eleanor Rosch and Barbara Lloyd (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978).

<sup>34</sup> Violi, 153. Our translation.

strongly towards the category “mother” (§4.5) rather than “professional woman” (§4.8), even if the image is different from the usual depiction of a mother in Italian advertising.

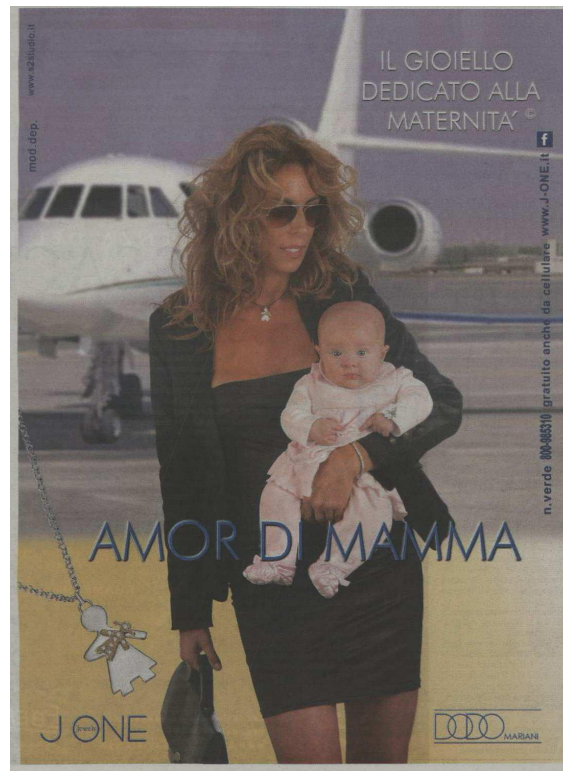


Figure 1.

As follows, we entered the semantic traits “woman,” “briefcase,” and “professional attire” as relevant to define the stereotype of a “professional woman,” and the traits “woman,” “caregiver,” “carrying a baby in the arms or near the body,” as traits that are relevant to the stereotype of “mother.” Let us then imagine an advertisement showing a woman in a business suit, walking with a briefcase in her right hand and holding the hand of a girl with a rucksack on her back with her left hand. Here the traits “woman,” “holding the hand of a girl,” and “caregiving,” define the category “mother,” while “woman,” “briefcase,” and “professional attire” identify the “professional woman” category. How is it then possible to select in either category the advertisement should be placed? Consequently, what traits should we ignore? In certain cases, this decision is based on semantic traits that are conveyed not by the human figure itself but by the environment in which the action takes place: a domestic milieu or a business setting, for example, may influence the decisions on where to allocate the female figure.

As stated in §1, one of the main objectives of our work was to *quantify* the presence of stereotype categories in the available corpus. This included both calculating the percentage of each category in the overall set of campaigns that included human figures as well as calculating the amount of monetary resources allocated by companies in each category. To achieve this, we opted to avoid double (or triple, or multiple) category allocations. We had to combine the fuzzy approach above described with *binary logic*, in order to obtain a more pragmatic result, aware of the fact that (i) the interpretation of each stereotype, as well as of any meaning, is nuanced, gradual, and does not rigidly comply with binary choices; (ii) the interpretation of each stereotype, as well as of any meaning, always has a margin of subjectivity and arbitrariness, because the portion of shared encyclopedia that the researcher is attributing to an image is always dependent on subjective limitations such as skills, tastes, beliefs and previous opinions of the researcher.

Before we describe the categories of stereotypes that we have identified (§4), we report hereby two of the eleven tables we have used. The tables define categories based on semantic traits that we assumed would define each category (hypotheses that we then confirmed, so that each table became definitive). Each advertisement has been entered in each table (i.e., in each category) based on the presence or absence of the defining traits. For example, Table 1 shows traits that define the “woman as decoration,” while Table 2 refers to the “mannequin woman.” From the tables, the binary logic (presence or absence) makes it clear that the analysis of meaning eludes such classification. This effort was necessary if we were to provide figures, investment amounts and percentages. We thus managed, not without difficulties, to balance qualitative analysis with quantitative goals. This effort, with its limitations, allowed us to obtain, from the eminently qualitative methodology of semiotic studies, some quantitative data that are far from being trivial (§5).

Characteristics of the woman as decoration	Advertisements				
	Rebecca Gioielli	Open Dot Com	Alitalia	Casolaro	Protesan
Female subject	x	x	x	x	x
Euphoria	x	x	x	x	x
Youth	x	x	x	x	-
Beauty	x	x	x	x	x
Demonstrative attitude toward product	x	-	x	x	x
Demonstrative attitude with text	-	-	-	-	-
Female subject is used as decoration	x	x	x	x	x
Female subject is not essential	x	x	x	x	x

Table 1.

Characteristics of the mannequin woman	Advertisements					
	Flexform	La Petite Robe	Iceberg	Shaft jeans	Tyche	Gucci
Female subject	x	x	x	x	x	x
Thinness	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pale skin, fairness	x	x	x	x	x	x
Narcotized female forms	x	x	x	-	x	-
Expressionless visage	x	x	-	x	-	x
Motionlessness	x	x	-	x	-	x
Stiffness	-	x	x	x	x	x
Plasticization	-	x	x	x	x	x

Table 2.

#### 4. Categories

In this section, we will illustrate the eleven female stereotype categories that have emerged from the corpus of 7000 campaigns that appeared in December 2013. For the sake of simplicity, we shall exemplify each category only through *printed* advertisements. However, the campaigns that we analyzed were complete and included spots, radio advertisements, press advertisements, billboards, and banners. For brevity, our description of male stereotypes shall not be as detailed, even though they were examined and divided in categories with the same methodology. We shall briefly summarize them in §5.

At the end of the description of each category, we shall specify the percentage of advertisements that, in December 2013, each single category accounted for in the entirety of

campaigns that featured female figures. As far as the percentage values of male stereotypes are concerned, we shall briefly provide some figures in §5 to show the massive difference compared to female stereotypes.

The eleven categories of stereotypes that we identified are: (1) the sexually available woman, (2) the woman as decoration, (3) the hacked woman, (4) the mannequin woman, (5) the mother, (6) the wife, (7) the sportswoman, (8) the professional woman, (9) the model woman, (10) the emotional woman, and (11) the pre-orgasmic woman.

#### 4.1. The Sexually Available Woman

This category features advertisements in which female figures that express the semantic trait of “sexual availability” are portrayed, i.e., their facial expressions and their body language suggest sexual availability that may be more or less explicit. The semantic traits that define this category are represented, as far as expressions are concerned, by signifiers that are both visual and verbal, i.e. they are expressed by both plastic and figurative formants, and by the verbal traits that accompanies them.

The main semantic trait represented in this category, even before the “sexual availability” is “femininity.” It is expressed firstly at the plastic level: there are no straight or rigid contours, the lines are curved, sinuous, and the shapes are rounded. A figurative formant that is recurring in this category is the look into the camera. It establishes a direct communication with the viewer, ensuring a very straightforward *me/you* rapport. Other recurring figurative formants to express “sexual availability” are the shape and fullness of lips, always full and saucy, often semi-opened and curled. Hair is always long, voluminous and wavy. These are two examples of printed advertisements that belong to this category (Figure 2).



Figure 2.

In some other cases, sexual availability is suggested, in addition to the image, by an ambiguity between text and image. In the advertisement shown in Figure 3, the raunchy look of the woman into the camera, as well as the headline “*La Zucchetti è ingorda*” (“Zucchetti has a big appetite”) clearly recall the semantic field of sexuality and soft porn. The model is about to bite into a burger that she holds in her hands, but the look and the smile suggest otherwise. While the advertisement shows an appetite for food, it clearly alludes to sexual appetites, evoking an imagery and ambiguity that is reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s in the Italian soft-porn comedy genre.

In 2013 the Milan-based communication agency NssFactory created an online game called “Fashion or Porn?” Can you distinguish fashion from pornography?” that is still available for play<sup>35</sup>. This is interesting as it highlights the close relationship between porn imagery and what is represented by mainstream fashion advertising campaigns: by playing this game, one can assess through firsthand experience how difficult it is to distinguish images from the fashion industry from images of pornographic material. What is apparent in the fashion industry may also be applied more generically to a number of campaigns for various product categories. For instance, the printed advertisement of Figure 3 advertises a software house. This will become even more evident when we will tackle the category of the pre-orgasmic woman (§4.11).



Figure 3.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “sexually available woman” accounted for 12.91% of campaigns that included female figures, making this category third place in the total corpus of campaigns that include human figures (this category is preceded by those of “model woman” and “woman as decoration”).<sup>36</sup>

#### 4.2. The Woman As Decoration

According to the Italian dictionary Treccani, a decoration is “the set of elements, motifs and devices that are added to a work of art or architectural oeuvre as ornament.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, an ornament is “anything that is added to be aesthetically pleasing, to increase elegance and, more in general, any decoration.”<sup>38</sup> The decoration is thus an added element that embellishes the actual

<sup>35</sup> The game can be accessed online at the following URL: <http://www.nssmag.com/fashion-or-porn>. Web. Accessed 28 August 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Guastini, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Giovanni Treccani, *Vocabolario della lingua italiana online*. Web. Accessed 31 January 2016. <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/decoration/>. Our translation.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ornamento/>. Our translation.

work, something that is not essential from a functional perspective (as in architecture) or to content (of a work of art for example). It is something that is added to an oeuvre, in a specific historic and cultural context, to make it look more appealing, visually attractive and elegant.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

This is the defining semantic trait of the category “woman as decoration”: her presence is not essential to the overall meaning of the advertisement in which she is placed. Let us take as an example the female figure represented in Figure 4: if we were to delete her, the advertisement would lose nothing as far as the message is concerned or its overall meaning. Figure 5 very successfully highlights this.

The woman as decoration is thus placed in the advertisement merely for her physical appearance. The “beauty” is indeed the second semantic trait of this category (which is, however, non-specific as it is found in all categories): what is the figurative formant of that face or of that female body in a certain advertisement? Beauty and nothing else, beauty with a mere and exclusive function of decoration.

Another consideration pertains the range of emotions portrayed by the visages and female bodies that act as decoration in this type of advertisements. These emotions are exclusively positive, ranging from serenity to joy, curiosity and cheerfulness. However, in this category such range of emotion is never exaggerated. The “woman as decoration” never attains the peaks of euphoria of the “emotional woman” (§4.10).

In December 2013 the stereotype of the “woman as decoration” appeared in 20.20% of the campaigns that included a female figure, placing it second after the “model woman,” as we will see in §4.9.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.3. The Hacked Woman

In this category, the identity, individuality and personality of the female subject blur and are cancelled. All that remains are body pieces (Figure 6).



Figure 6.

As clearly shown in Figure 6, in this category faces are *never* fully depicted and are *always* cut off and excluded from the visual. Legs as well as arms and other body parts may also be cut off or isolated from the body, according to the product or brand that is being advertised: in the case of shoes, only feet and maybe legs will be visible, while for purses only hands and maybe forearms and arms will be portrayed. The result is an utter depersonalization of the depicted women: they are no longer subjects and become mere objects, no different from the products that are being advertised.

Additionally, several of these advertisements may imply, with their atmosphere (lights, colors, and settings) the presence of an observer-*voyeur* that is invited to peep in the scene, as it would be perceived through a window or the keyhole, perceiving parts of the scene, unable to discern the identity of the person whose hacked pieces are shown.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “hacked woman” accounted for 4.01% of the campaigns with female figures.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4.4. The Mannequin Woman

The “mannequin woman” is characterized by a high degree of fixity in her expression, and the lack of movement in the body.

<sup>39</sup> Guastini, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

In Figure 7, we see an example of a female subject that is stiff and rigid, looking at the external viewer. However, unlike the “sexually available woman,” in this category looking in the camera is not essential and, when enacted, does not carry the same meaning. In case of the mannequin woman, the external viewer may be “involved” by the look in the camera, but to a much lesser extent, because the look and, in general, the visage of the woman do not convey any emotion whatsoever. They are fixed and inexpressive. There is an underlining invitation to stare not so much at the person, but at the goods that the “mannequin woman” is wearing.



Figure 7.

Semantic traits of this category include “rigidity” and “artificiality” of the body, foremost, but also of the face. Both are characterized by plastic formants: the lines that delimit the bust as well as the limbs and the overall gait feature parallel lines and/or tend to draw regular geometrical lines, which contributes to an overall “artificial” feel. This is due to the fact that in nature shapes and lines of living beings are almost never regular, nor parallel or symmetrical. It is as if the woman was not a living, breathing person but a mannequin instead. Chromatic formants also contribute to enhancing the overall unnatural or artificial feeling: face and body are routinely retouched to appear smoother, shinier, and more uniform than naturally possible, as if they were coated in plastic and not made of human flesh. Smoothness and chromatic uniformity enhance the lack of expression of the face. Finally, as far as the figurative formants are concerned, the essential trait of this category is “slimness.” Unlike the “sexually available woman,” whose curved lines express and enhance their “femininity,” the straight lines of this category are reminiscent, once again, of store mannequins.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “mannequin woman” appeared in 6.69% of the campaigns that included female figures.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.5. The Mother

This category includes the advertising depictions where a woman appears in the role of mother.



Figure 8.

As shown in Figure 8, the role of mother is enacted almost invariably thanks to other actors, i.e., sons and daughters. The mother is more recognizable if paired with one or more children. However, this concept is sometimes conveyed with items that are connected to childcare and/or the education of children. The co-presence of children and young adults is thus the first trait that allows us to include an advertisement in this category.

The mere presence of actors and/or items near a female figure is, however, not sufficient to convey her role of “mother.” Her role is also indicated by actions, attitudes and emotions portrayed by the woman or by the children. In Figure 8, for instance, we see that the adult female subject and the girl interact with each other both emotionally and physically: mother and daughter are playing together.

In other terms, in the “mother” category the female role is portrayed as a *thematic role* (according to the definitions of Greimas and Courtés) in a fragment of a story in which a woman and her presumed child or children are involved together: an average, everyday situation (a *common script* as described by Eco).<sup>42</sup> The mother is portrayed during care for the children’s body (cleaning, massaging, combing, etc.), the preparation of their meal (preparing food), a playful situation (inside the house or outdoors), or during educative moments (helping them with homework or explaining something) and so forth.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Greimas and Courtés, 1979. See entries “role,” “theme,” “thematic.” Eco 1979; 1984.

In December 2013, the stereotype of “mother” featured in 5.89% of the campaigns that included female figures.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.6. The Wife

This category includes advertisement representations in which women are portrayed as partners, fiancées, or wives.



Figure 9.

As is the case of “mother,” the “wife” is recognized as a *thematic role* within a *common script* that is depicted in the advertisement: the attitude, the emotion and the relationship between the two actors is fundamental in defining the female subject as “wife.” In Figure 9, for instance, the woman is standing next to her husband and they seem ready to have lunch in a very relaxed and cheerful scene. She is grating cheese on pasta while the husband is looking at her, sitting and waiting for his meal. She was probably the one who cooked food and is serving it, because she is standing and she seems to be adjusting her pasta dish, while the husband is already seated and merely smiles and waits.

In December 2013, the stereotype of “wife” only featured 0.60% of campaigns that included female human figures.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.7. The Sportswoman

In the “sportswoman” category, we included all advertisement portraits that show one or more female figures while practicing a sport at any level (Figure 10).

The number of advertisements in our corpus that may fit in this category is not overwhelming. This is because Italian advertising prefers to represent women that are professionals in their own discipline, such as swimmers, volleyball players, fencers, all of national

<sup>43</sup> Guastini, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

fame, who compete in national and international events. In this case as in others, the line between categories is blurred: the “sportswoman” is also a “professional woman” (§4.8). If we were to showcase these two categories as sets (Figure 11), we would clearly see that the set of “sportswomen” intersects with the set “professional women,” creating a subset of “professional sportswomen,” i.e., women who made a profession of their sport.

For this reason, we opted to include in the “sportswoman” category only women that, in the advertisement depiction, appear to be practicing a sport at any level, but that did not make their sport their profession. In the “professional woman” we instead included all professions, including professional sportswomen (§4.8).



Figure 10.

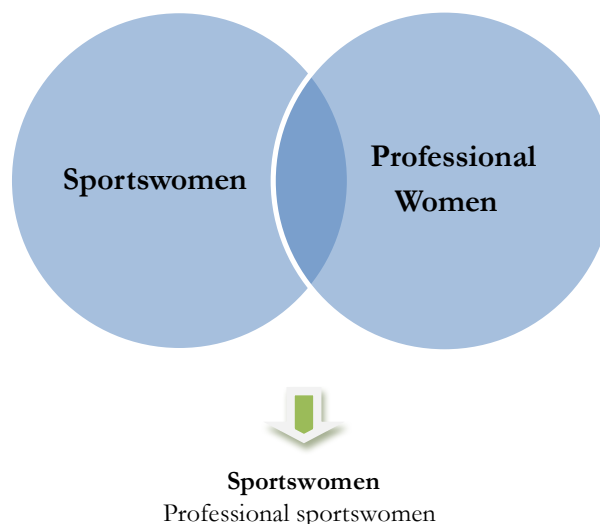


Figure 11.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “sportswoman” accounted for 1.4% of the total campaigns that featured female figures.<sup>45</sup>

#### 4.8. The Professional Woman



Figure 12.

In this category, we included all advertisements that displayed female figures as workers and/or entrepreneurs. We see in Figure 12 an advertisement of the cell phone carrier Vodafone promoting a special plan for self-employed people. In order to represent these workers, Vodafone chose to portray a self-employed female baker. Please notice how the female figure does not have a frontal pose and is not looking in the camera. She appears to be working, caught in a moment of her daily work activity. In this case, as well as previously seen in the “mother” and “wife” categories, the “professional woman” is a thematic role in a standard story.

Figure 13 also displays an advertisement of a “professional woman.” However, the final results vary because her role does not stem from any action, but by her pose instead. Thus, the woman in Figure 13 appears to be less professional than the one in Figure 12. What we know about the subject role as a professional is given through the text, superimposed on the visual: “VIRGINIE MORGON. Executive Board Member and Chief Investment Officer of Eurazeo supports the idea and research of the HRW (Human Rights Watch-Paris) by donating the earnings from the ‘Moncler in Borsa’ campaign. In the advertisement, the woman looks at the camera and smiles to the external observer. She is posing for a photo shooting as if she was a “model woman” rather than a “professional woman.” The meaning conveyed by the figure that we recognize (i.e. the woman and the photo shooting set she is in) does not match the verbal part and the female figure appears to be relevant due to her physical features rather than her professional career.

Both advertisements are fit to be included in the “professional woman” category, albeit the former does convey a higher number of traits that are typical of this category. As we have seen in §3, items may differ from the prototypical core of a specific category and still be part of it.

In December 2013 the stereotype of “professional woman” accounted for 9.16% of the total campaigns that featured female figures, placing this category at fourth rank.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

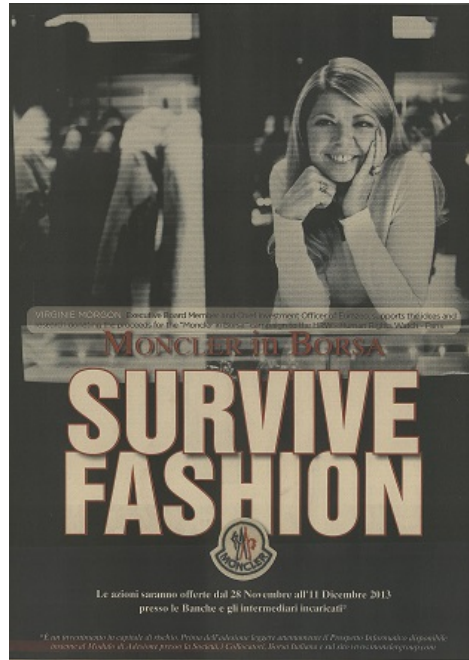


Figure 13.

#### 4.9. The Model Woman

In this category female subjects are proposed as a reference model, as a paragon. The model woman is the prototype of “beauty.” We defined this category *by negation* of the defining traits of the other categories. These female representations feature female subjects whose function is solely and exclusively to display their aesthetic beauty. There is no sexual availability, nor plasticization or stiffness reminiscent of mannequins, nor do these images feature over-the-top emotions such as in the case of the “emotional woman” (§4.10). Furthermore, no actions that may affiliate these female figures to the roles of mother or professional are present, and no action unity may evoke sexual arousal, such as the case of the “pre-orgasmic woman” (§4.11). Additionally, the woman may not be considered a “woman as decoration” because her physical presence is essential to the advertisement message as it is connected to the promoted product or service. This category features anonymous models, such as the one depicted in Figure 14, as well as Cate Blanchett, promoting *Sì*, a perfume by Giorgio Armani, again in Figure 14.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “model woman” accounted for 35.52% of the overall campaigns that featured female figures, placing this stereotype as top ranking in the corpus.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4.10. The Emotional Woman

The stereotype of the “emotional woman” as represented in our corpus features an over-the-top intensity in expressing a specific emotion, mainly positive but sometimes negative. These emotions range from joy, happiness, and cheerfulness to outright glee, and sometimes border on frenzy, euphoric arousal, and hysterical fit. Female figures included in this category do not experience mere surprise: they abandon themselves in boundless and uncontrollable bewilderment. Anger is replaced by rage and so on. It would be safe to say that female figures in this category enact the *Canonical Passional Schema* in which emotions manifest themselves to the fullest extent.<sup>48</sup> These “altered emotional states” are normally caused by the usage of everyday products: cosmetics,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Fontanille, “Le schéma des passions,” *Protée*, XXI, no. 1. (1993).

home appliances, cleaning products or washing products. Often the “emotional woman” shares with the “woman as decoration” the characteristic of being unnecessary to convey the advertisement message. However, it is the emotional exaggeration that defines her as an “emotional woman.”



Figure 14.

For example, in the advertisement of Figure 15, the protagonist appears in the thrall of two negative emotions: *frustration* and consequently *anger*. She expresses these emotions fully, with the entirety of her face: arched eyebrows, wide open eyes, wide open mouth, as if she was screaming at the top of her lungs, in an uncontrollable fit. It would appear as if the “emotional woman” is unable to control her reactions and her passions, even when confronted with ordinary items which would never elicit such powerful reactions in normal circumstances with normal human beings.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “emotional woman” featured in 1.34% of the campaigns that included female figures.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4.11. The Pre-Orgasmic Woman

In order to identify this category, we focused our attention on the face and on the minutest details of facial expressions. In order to do this, we searched for conceptual tools outside the boundaries of semiotics. Therefore, we availed ourselves of the work of José-Miguel Fernández-Dols, Pilar Carrera and Carlos Crivelli, psychologists of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. In

<sup>49</sup> Guastini, 32.



Figure 15.

this study, the facial expressions of more than 100 volunteers were analyzed, throughout the range of excitement leading to climax.<sup>50</sup> Volunteers registered their expressions during sexual arousal and orgasm, abiding by precise instructions as to where to place the camera and lights, with certain prohibitions that included not simulating and not exaggerating the orgasm. Videos were then uploaded by volunteers on the [www.beautifulagony.com](http://www.beautifulagony.com) website and subsequently analyzed by the researchers. Each recording was analyzed according to the four stages that make up the human sexual response, as defined by seminal study Masters and Johnson (1966):

- (1) *Baseline Excitement*: the 6 seconds at the beginning of the clip in which the sender is beginning to be sexually excited.
- (2) *Plateau*: the first half of the 12-second sequence immediately before the Resolution period. This period is marked by changes in sounds and breathing that marked an imminent orgasm.
- (3) *Plateau Orgasm*: the second half of 12-second Plateau sequence. This second six-second period includes signs of orgasm and finishes when the orgasm likely ended as indicated by the senders' faces becoming obviously relaxed and their switching into the fourth period. The ascription of orgasm to this Plateau Orgasm period is based on the apparent muscular tension and sounds produced by the sender, an estimate that fits Masters and Johnson's estimate of the duration of a "normal" female orgasm (4 to 6.4 seconds long), whereas a masculine orgasm is usually shorter.<sup>51</sup>
- (4) *Resolution*: the period from the time the sender relaxes, keeps the eyes open and moves the head to gaze around, focusing on other activities than sex (e.g., adjusting the camera or interacting with someone). The duration of this period varied from one clip to the next and rarely reached 6 s ( $M=3.64$  s)<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Jose Miguel Fernández-Dols, Pilar Carrera, and Carlos Crivelli, "Facial behavior while experiencing sexual excitement," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 35 (2011): 63-71.

<sup>51</sup> For other estimates of the average length of 'normal' female orgasm see Meston, et al, "Women orgasm," *Annual Review of Sex Research*, no. 15 (2004): 173-257.

For more information on the length of male orgasm, see Gert Hoslstege, et al, "Brain activation during human male ejaculation," *The Journal of Neuroscience*, no. 23 (2003): 9185-9193.

<sup>52</sup> Fernández-Dols et al, 65.

These four stages of sexual arousal were then analyzed with FACS (*Facial Action Coding System*) elaborated by Ekman and Friesen.<sup>53</sup> The FACS describe action units that code muscular movements in the face. The Action Units (AU) that were most frequently observed in the first three stages of sexual arousals were closed eyes (AU43), lowering of eyebrows (AU4), lowering of jaw (AU26). In Figure 16 a screenshot of a video uploaded by one of the volunteers to the Beautiful Agony website demonstrates the simultaneous occurrence of all of the three aforementioned action units.



Figure 16.

Fernández-Dols, Carrera and Crivelli subsequently identified the two other action units of the first three phases of sexual arousal: semi-closed lips (AU25) and upward corners of lips (AU12).<sup>54</sup> Often these action units occur in combinations with others. For example, in the Baseline Excitement stage some combinations include closed eyes and semi-closed lips (AU43 + AU25), lowered jaw + semi-closed lips (AU26 + AU25). The first combination also frequently occurs in the Plateau and Plateau Orgasm stages.

The Plateau and the Plateau Orgasm phases also included other combinations, principally AU4 (frown/brow lower) or AU4 + AU6 (frown/brow lower and cheek-raise) with closed eyes and lips parted or closed eyes and jaw drop. There were also low but relevant frequencies of combinations in which frown/brow lower and cheek-raise (AU4 + AU6) or lips part (AU25) were combined with tight eyelids (AU7) rather than fully closed eyes.<sup>55</sup>

We decided to rely on this psychological research and the analysis of facial expressions in terms of presence or lack thereof of a specific action unit is consistent with the methodology that we have adopted, based on componential semantic meaning analysis (and corrected in terms of prototype semantics). By relying on FACS and on the research by Fernández-Dols, Carrera and Crivelli, we gathered advertising depictions that show women with at least one of the combinations highlighted by the authors. We included them in the “pre-orgasmic woman” category, as these facial action units normally precede the orgasmic climax. In Figure 17, for instance, the Damiani advertisement shows a woman lying on the bed with her hand on her forehead, eyebrows lowered, and semi-closed eyes and lips, which is exactly the combination of action units AU4 + AU25 + AU43 i.e., lowered eyebrows + semi closed lips + closed eyes.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, *Facial Action Coding System (FACS): Investigator's guide (Part Two)*, (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1978).

<sup>54</sup> Fernandez-Dols, et al., 67.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 66-67.

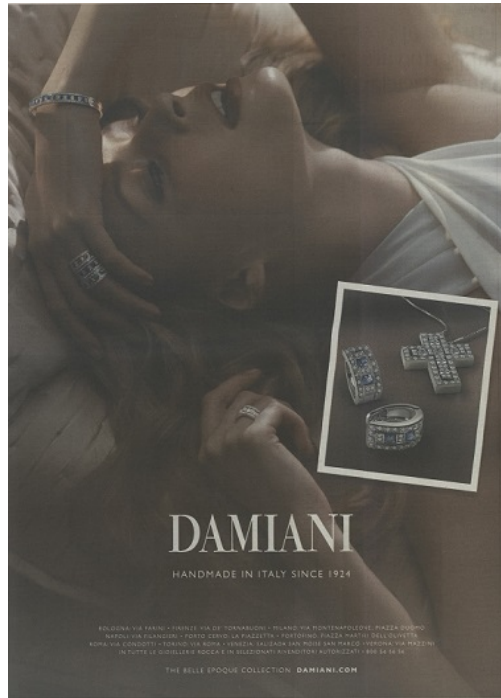


Figure 17.

In December 2013, the stereotype of the “pre-orgasmic woman” appeared in 1.94% of campaigns that featured female figures.<sup>56</sup>

#### 5. Results and Possible Future Developments of This Study

Before we provide the overall figures that emerged from our research and come to certain conclusions, it is necessary to add a few caveats.

In the entirety of campaigns we analyzed in which human figures were present, women were depicted more frequently than men: in 54% of the instances versus 31.8%. This datum is hardly surprising, because women are in charge of purchasing a large array of products and services: companies and advertising agencies are aware of this and behave accordingly.

As previously noted, we identified 11 categories of female stereotypes, but only managed to identify 8 categories of male stereotypes. Hereby they are listed by representativeness in the corpus: “the professional” (50.97%), “the model man” (20.71%), “the sportsman” (13.20%), “the hacked man” (4.66%), “the father” (4.32%), “the man as decoration” (3.53%), “the sexually available man” (1.71%), “the husband” (0.23%).<sup>57</sup>

Additionally, in 5.9% of campaigns men and women appeared together, i.e., depicted as “lovers” or a couple, in situations that would presume the existence of an emotional bond. This category should be added to the 11 female and 8 male categories and, in both cases, it ranks last both as representativeness and in terms of economic investment by companies.

A final caveat: as we have previously seen, all categories have been defined with methodological rigor only as far as the corpus of 7000 campaigns released in 2013 are concerned (the final calculations also solely refer to the month of December). However, we carried out an antecedent verification to test our methodology, and its results on a corpus of spots and advertisements released in February 2013 as well. A group of people in which professionals outside of semiotic academia was prevalent (and therefore oblivious to semiotics) had examined this corpus *before* the previously described methodology had been set up. As a result, each of the

<sup>56</sup> Guastini, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

stereotypes that we identified in the corpus dated December 2013 could also be found in *all* of the 8000 campaigns that had been examined. That is not only the 7000 campaigns in December, but in the spots and advertisements of February 2013, as well as in the campaigns analyzed by Guastini in the intermediate months of the same year.

The main difference between female and male stereotypes can be perceived only by analyzing the figures in their entirety. By summing the percentages of representation of female stereotypes, 81.27% of all women in advertising in December 2013 were represented as either model women (35.52%), women as decoration (20.20%), sexually available women (12.91%), mannequin women (6.69%), hacked women (4.01%), pre-orgasmic women (1.94%).<sup>58</sup> However, the male category that was most represented in the corpus was the “professional” (50.97%), followed by the “model man” (20.71%) and the “sportsman” (13.20%).<sup>59</sup> Conversely, in the first three ranks of female stereotypes, as we have seen, the following categories were prevalent: “model woman” (35.52%), “woman decoration” (20.20%), “sexually available woman” (12.91%).<sup>60</sup>

To summarize these results with an economic perspective in mind, in December 2013 in Italy a certain number of companies spent 33,567,194 Euro to represent a set of female figures. These female figures were comprised mostly of female models, women used as decoration, women who are sexually available, women hacked into pieces, women with features of mannequins, and women who appear to be on the verge of an orgasm. In all these stereotypes, women are selected *solely* on the basis of their physique, their visage and their body, as opposed to professional skills or what they can do in their workplace.<sup>61</sup>

This means that in 2013, in Italy, when advertising campaigns included human figures (as opposed to only products, landscapes or objects), the so-called “creative” contents, the messages created by advertising companies mainly (81.27%) represented women through one aspect only: *their physical appearance*. This situation is far from being balanced and becomes even more apparent in the quantitative analysis.

Has anything changed today compared to December 2013? It would be useful and necessary to transform this research into a permanent monitoring activity of Italian advertising, as Guastini stated in his comments on the 2013 results. This monitoring activities could be financed by companies and/or advertising agencies.

The utility thereof would be twofold and:

1. Supply institutions with objective data (as opposed to morning show chit-chats), which would allow, not unlike medical exams, to assess how healthy Italian communication is;
2. Promptly update companies and communication professionals alike on the level of saturation that certain categories have reached. Advertising and marketing should characterize a brand and not bury into a herd of similar ideas, whatever they may be. A quarterly report would set forth a virtuous cycle of self-regulation based on feedback.<sup>62</sup>

Our study offers a helpful prospective for commercial advertising in Italy and can provide useful information for investing companies. Let us analyze now the possible perspectives of our work in the field of semiotic studies.

As we previously mentioned, the research we carried out relied on a methodology hereto applied exclusively on single texts (a single advertisement, a TV spot, and so on) or a small number thereof (one, two or three campaigns at most) which we purposefully aimed to apply to an extensive corpus. This extension from very limited corpora to very vast ones has certain

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 36. Our translation

limitations. The first one concerns the time required to carry out the analysis: this work demanded almost a full year of conjunct effort from the three authors of this article to attain the categorizations we have presented. Time requirements of this magnitude may be discouraging to semiotic academics, unless they can dedicate several full time months to the project or are part of a larger research team. These teams may be of considerable size in case of larger corpora (up to 20 analyses) and thus carry a proportional economic burden (as it is highly unlikely that 10, 15 or 20 academics would dedicate their undivided attention *gratuitously* for several months to draft a research project of the size of the one we carried out).

However, relinquishing the analysis of larger corpora (that may include up to 100,000 samples, if the intention is to extend the analysis over several years of campaigns) due to lack of time or funds (the latter a problem that plagues many Italian public universities) would mean abandoning the interpretation of entire constellations of meaning (that are now more readily available thanks to the internet and digital tools). It means giving up the identification of trends and recurrences that may be very important each time the research would require higher-than-average numbers of texts. Additionally, if we consider that macro-social phenomena (including mass communication, purchase patterns as well as ordinary social behaviors like walking in the city streets, visiting museums, and shopping) as well as online behaviors (such as search engine or social media activities) *always* imply a large number of data, it is clear that forgoing semiotic analysis would relinquish much in this era of big data. Its usage in human sciences is therefore more and more necessary (as well as urgent).

This begs the question: how can we extend an analytic methodology that was created and optimized for smaller sized corpora to large numbers and maintain sustainable research?

We deem that a very productive exchange between semiotics and information technology (IT) would be a first step in optimizing the treatment of larger and more complex corpora. Let us imagine, for instance, what benefits our work would have reaped if we had used certain specific image analysis IT techniques. Automated image classification systems have tried to describe image contents with IT models that are reminiscent of the human eye for many years now.<sup>63</sup> These tools may represent information contained in images on three levels: firstly, through certain features of the image, such as color, texture and elementary geometrical shapes; secondly, through the more accurate description of first level elements by identifying their aggregation and positioning; thirdly, it may try to account for the “meaning” of the scenes depicted through textual labels that organize the types of images (human figure, non-human, animal, etc.). For example, if we had such an image analysis tool that could have automatically sorted images with human figures from images without such elements, we would not have needed to look at all the advertisements to exclude those without humans. Additionally, similar tools for the elaboration of video data exist and they could have been just as easily applied to the television spots of our corpus.

Similarly, when working on large databases of texts, it could prove useful to resort to *metadata* that can organize them pre-emptively. In our case, for instance, an archive that already used metadata could have included information such as the brand, the product item category, the type of people that are depicted in the advertisement, and whether there is more than one person in the advertisement. Consequently, we could have carried out database research with a more precise target and with increased effectiveness, in a more intelligent manner. We could have, therefore, saved time and been able to immediately focus on the identification of the stereotype categories hereby presented. The semiotic analysis would have been more detailed for each stereotype and might have delved into the *particular* quality of each stereotype, i.e., the *specific way* in which each represents men and women. It could have included, for instance, the specific visual elements (plastic or figurative) that are most recurrent in each stereotype, the most frequent isotopies (within each stereotype as well as with each other), the most usual enunciation

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<sup>63</sup> Montagnuolo, 2005.

modalities with which companies establish their relationship with customers, and so forth. Thus, we could have used in each instance the most adequate conceptual tools and analysis levels, as is customary in semiotics when analyzing single texts or smaller corpora. Our work is currently missing this approach, and this will be the focus of a future stage of our research.

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