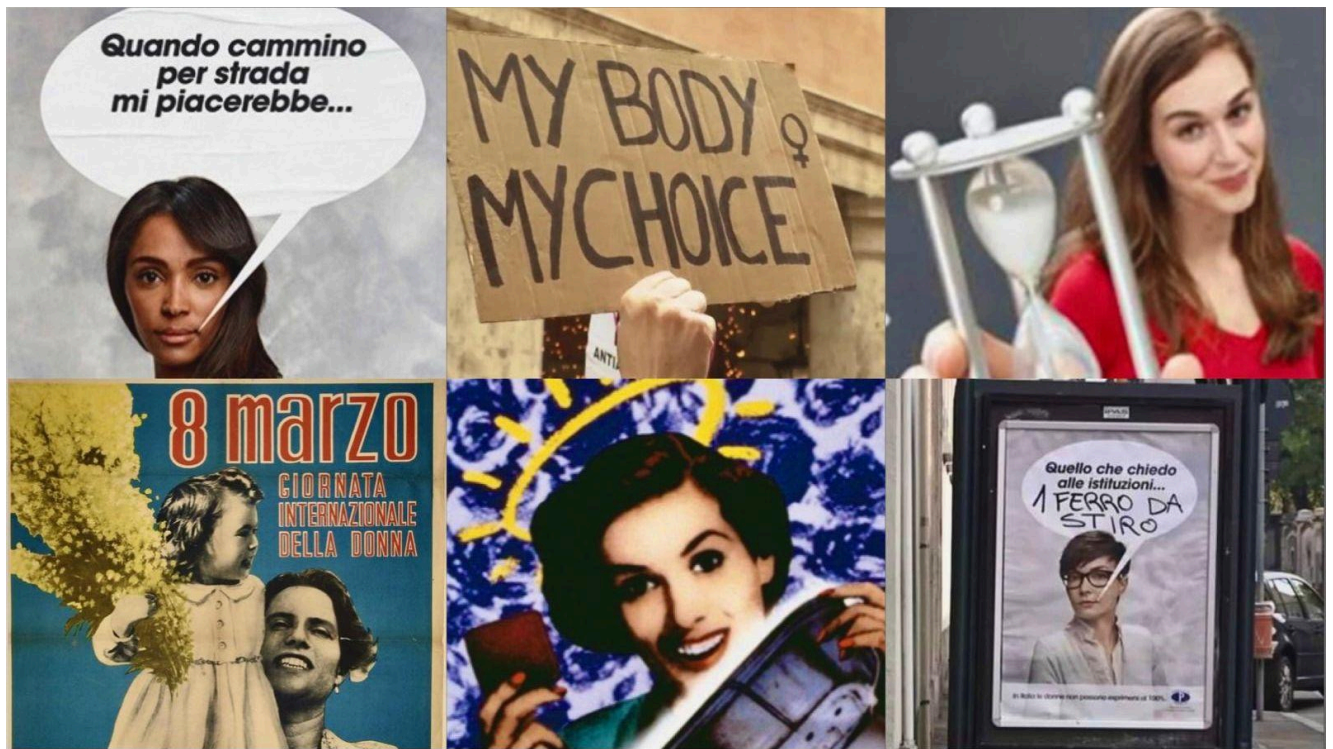


The evolution of women's representation in government advertising

From the 90s to today



Gender and media - group 1

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Meet the team

- Capozzi Stefano: In charge of examining the archive of Italian government and ministerial channels to find the ads to analyse.
- Dal Lago Sofia: In charge of creating the survey for Italian and non-Italian citizens and the final paper.
- Zeni Valentina: In charge of analyzing the responses of the survey for Italian citizens and creating presentations.
- Hammada Imada: In charge of analyzing the responses of the survey for non-italian citizens.

Outline

This project aims to analyze how women have been represented in Italian government advertisements from the 1990s to the present. Specifically, the research will focus on identifying gender stereotypes, if present, and assess how these advertisements align with the objectives outlined in *Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action*, which emphasizes the need for promoting gender equality in all spheres of life. The primary objective is to explore the evolution of the female figure in Italian public service announcements (PSAs), analyzing how social, cultural, and political changes have influenced the portrayal of women in the media. The study will examine both print and television advertisements, considering how these mediums have shaped public perceptions of gender roles over time. Furthermore, the project will investigate whether Italian citizens, both university students and non-university individuals, are able to recognize these stereotypes. We will focus on several key factors, such as the persistence or transformation of gender stereotypes, the level of inclusivity, and the extent to which these advertisements empower women. By comparing responses across different groups of the population, we aim to understand how awareness of these representations varies according to educational background and other demographic factors. Through this detailed analysis, we seek to better understand the role of advertising in reflecting and shaping societal norms, while evaluating its potential to challenge outdated representations and promote greater gender equality.

Relevance

Media, particularly advertising, has a profound impact on shaping public perceptions and social expectations. In the past, advertising has enhanced gender stereotypes and prejudices by portraying women as objects and adding negative components to them. Addressing gender bias and its effects is extremely important to orient the audience and the public towards inclusivity. In democratic societies like ours, the media must be used correctly to influence and inform society more inclusively. Moreover, if we consider the power of the media in shaping society, we believe

that these, used correctly by the government, can be a fundamental tool for influencing and informing society more inclusively.

Existing Literature and Campaigns

The way women are portrayed in government advertising has been closely examined, especially as society's views on gender equality have evolved. Research by the **European Institute for Gender Equality** (EIGE) points out big differences in how European countries include gender equality in their policies. For example, **Italy** has been working to **match the EU's standards** for promoting gender equality in policies and public messaging. Research, like the studies by **Åkestam et al.**, shows that using gender stereotypes in ads - such as fixed ideas about how men and women should look or behave - can have serious negative effects. These stereotypes strengthen outdated social norms and keep biases alive, making it harder to achieve gender equality in how people are viewed. This aligns with **Oxfam's findings** on violence against women in Italy **post-Beijing 1995**, which illustrate a troubling relationship between societal depictions of women and the persistence of gender-based violence. Finally, research, like **Cortese's** work on sexism in media, has studied how ads in the past and today often portray women in passive and subordinate roles. These ads tend to associate femininity with dependence and superficial traits, while ignoring or sidelining messages that promote inclusivity and authenticity. Building on these insights, our project will evaluate and analyze government campaigns, to try to understand if government actions in the field of advertising are in line with what is stated in the Beijing Platform.

Goal and target

This study aims to challenge stereotypes, reject degrading portrayals, and celebrate the diverse roles of women through inclusive and empowering communication. Advertising, as a powerful tool, can inspire societal change and promote gender equality. The target of our research are non-university individuals as they represent a group that might be less exposed to certain critical reflections on gender stereotypes. People who have not pursued higher education may be less

involved in academic discussions on topics such as gender, media, and female representation. This allows the researchers to explore whether and how stereotypes are perceived and internalized by a group that has had a different type of education and cultural exposure. Specifically, the sample for this study will consist of 20 participants, equally distributed across genders, aged between 20 and 30 years. This demographic was chosen to focus on young adults, a group highly influenced by and active in contemporary media consumption. Despite the fact that some of the advertisements analyzed are from earlier decades, we believe that examining younger generations provides valuable insights into how past stereotypes persist or are reinterpreted in contemporary cultural contexts. Young adults have grown up in a digital and highly visual media environment, where advertising plays a significant role in shaping cultural norms and identity. Their perspectives can reveal whether historical gender representations in government campaigns still resonate, or if they are viewed as outdated and disconnected from modern societal values. Moreover, understanding how this age group engages with such representations can offer a fresh lens through which to assess the evolution of advertising's impact over time. Moreover, the sample is interculturally diverse, consisting of 10 Italian citizens and 10 non-Italian citizens. The inclusion of participants from both Italian and non-Italian backgrounds introduces an intercultural element to the study, which is essential for understanding how gender stereotypes in advertising might be perceived differently across cultural contexts. However, it is important to clarify the rationale behind choosing these specific participant groups. Cultural differences can shape individuals' perceptions of gender roles, as values, norms, and societal expectations vary across regions. Exploring these differences will not only validate the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives but will also enrich the analysis of gender representation. This approach allows the study to examine the extent to which cultural influences affect the recognition and interpretation of gender stereotypes in advertising. By emphasizing the role of culture, the study can provide more comprehensive insights into how advertising perpetuates or challenges gender norms in different social environments.

Methodology

- Data collection: A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to assess the evolution of female representation in advertisements.
 - **Qualitative:** Selection of 2 government advertisements per decade (1990s, 2000s, 2010s) to assess recurring themes and representation of gender roles; Follow-up interviews for individuals who recognized stereotypes, to explore their background and reasoning;
 - **Quantitative:** Surveys were participants were asked to identify stereotypes and share their perceptions of the advertisements.
- Analysis: Ads will be analyzed using visual communication frameworks, looking at gender roles, visual strategies and context. We will also incorporate audience reception studies, including surveys or interviews, to understand how these portrayals affect public perceptions and gender norms.

→ Advertisement Selection

As mentioned earlier, we have selected two government advertisements per decade (1990s, 2000s, and 2010s) to analyze recurring themes and gender role representation. All the selected advertisements are sourced from Italian governmental channels and “*Pubblicità Progresso*.” Ministerial communication refers to messaging from the state, which should naturally play a leading role in social communication. These advertisements typically focus on public utility themes aimed at raising awareness and educating the public. On the other hand, “*Pubblicità Progresso*” has built a strong reputation over its 40-year career and became a foundation in 2005. Its inspiration came from the American Advertising Council, a system created in the 1940s to support the U.S. government during World War II. The primary focus of *Pubblicità Progresso* is social communication, tackling issues that have evolved over the years and highlighting societal changes. Key themes of interest for the foundation include environmental issues, health, racism, and so on. In selecting the advertisements, we have ensured that they address relevant

gender-related themes, both explicitly and implicitly, to assess how women have been represented and whether these advertisements challenge or reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. The focus will be on both the visual and linguistic elements of the ads, examining how women are portrayed in relation to traditional gender roles and the extent to which they embody empowerment, inclusivity, and social change. By focusing on these advertisements, we aim to uncover the evolution of gender representation in public service media over the last three decades and analyze the societal and cultural shifts that have influenced these portrayals.

→ Survey structure

To collect data, we created two separate surveys tailored to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of our participants: one for Italian respondents and another for non-Italian respondents. This dual-survey approach ensures that both groups can fully understand and engage with the questions in their native or preferred language, minimizing potential misinterpretations. It also allows us to explore cultural differences in the perception of gender representation in advertisements. The surveys share a common structure but have been adapted to reflect the nuances of each group's cultural and social contexts. Participants are asked to analyze selected advertisements, both visually and textually, and share their perceptions of gender roles, stereotypes, and the overall messages conveyed.

The structure of the survey is composed of three main parts:

1. In the first phase, participants were shown a series of advertisements without any prior information regarding stereotypes. They were then asked an open-ended question: *"What do you primarily notice in these advertisements?"*. This phase was designed to elicit spontaneous and unbiased responses, enabling an understanding of initial impressions without the influence of stereotype awareness.
2. In the second phase, participants were presented with a predefined list of stereotypes to provide a framework for more targeted reflection.

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3. Subsequent questions were tailored to the stereotypes introduced, encouraging participants to reconsider their initial impressions in light of this new information. This phase aimed to capture how stereotype awareness shapes participants' reactions and opinions.

→ **Follow-up interviews:**

Following the survey phase, a series of follow-up interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into participants' recognition of gender stereotypes in the selected advertisements. The follow-up interviews were designed to explore the underlying factors that contributed to participants' identification of stereotypes, as well as to assess their broader awareness of gender issues. The follow-up interviews focused on individuals who had explicitly recognized gender stereotypes during the survey phase. The sample comprised women who identified stereotypes, as no men identified these issues during the survey. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in responses while focusing on the core research questions. Participants were asked to reflect on the advertisements they reviewed during the survey. Additionally, the interviews explored participants' recent engagement with topics related to gender issues, particularly through social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. This aimed to examine the potential influence of digital platforms on participants' awareness and understanding of gender representations. By conducting these follow-up interviews, we sought to enrich the survey findings and explore the cognitive and social factors influencing participants' perceptions of gender roles in media.

Expected results

By taking into account Section J.2 of the Beijing Platform for Action, we “selected” some key points, such as:

- *“Promoting a balanced portrayal of women and girls and their multiple roles”;*
- *“Refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities, rather than presenting them as creative human beings, key actors to and beneficiaries of the process of development”;*
- *“Sexist stereotypes displayed in the media are gender discriminatory and degrading in nature”.*

As discussed in class, we expect to find, especially after the implementation of the Beijing Platform, a series of improvements regarding women representation in government advertisements.

Challenges and limits

- **Cultural sensitivity:** cultural norms and values may influence how Italian and non-Italian participants interpret gender roles in advertisements, potentially affecting the consistency of survey responses.
- **Access to archives:** obtaining a diverse range of advertisements from both past and present may prove challenging due to limitations in available archives.
- **Subjectivity in visual interpretation:** visual analysis is inherently subjective, and consistency in interpreting ads may be affected. To mitigate this, a standardized framework for analysis will be employed.
- **Quantitative data:** due to time and resource constraints, the sample size and data collected may be insufficient for drawing definitive conclusions. However, these findings will lay the groundwork for future research.
- **Potential subjectivity** of the researchers during the visual analysis process: as interpretations of visual content can vary, there is a risk that personal biases may

influence the results. To address this, future studies could employ independent coders or utilize a standardized analytical framework to enhance consistency and reduce the impact of individual perspectives on the findings.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study could have significant applications both in academic and governmental contexts. Academically, the results may contribute to the development of new theoretical frameworks or methodologies for analyzing visual content in media studies. In governmental settings, these insights could inform public policy initiatives aimed at addressing issues of representation, inclusivity, or the impact of media on societal perceptions. For example, understanding how specific visuals influence public opinion could guide the creation of more effective communication campaigns or regulations on media content.

Analysis of results

The analysis will be conducted in three stages. First, survey responses will be examined to evaluate the extent to which the primary audience recognizes the presence of gender stereotypes in the selected advertisements. Second, the advertisements will be assessed for alignment with the principles and goals of the Beijing Platform for Action. Finally, the study will investigate whether tangible progress has been achieved over time in reducing gender stereotyping and promoting equality in advertising.

Advertisement case studies

The first advertisement analyzed is “*L’anima del Progresso*” by *Pubblicità Progresso* in 1992.



The image depicts a smiling woman holding a wallet and a metal tray, with a glowing halo drawn above her head, suggesting moral or virtuous qualities. In the ad there is a clear association of women with caregiving and household responsibilities, implied by the tray and the focus on commerce. Moreover, the portrayal of a flawless, cheerful woman perpetuates the stereotype of women needing to appear pleasant and accommodating.

In our survey we asked participants if they noticed any stereotype in the ad: only three Italian participants out of 10 were able to recognize the stereotype, while the others just focused on the structure of the image, pointing out the repetition of the word “*anima*”.

We can see the same results with international participants: only three out of ten individuals noticed a female stereotype, while the others were not able to even properly understand the advertisement. We believe it is important to point out that some individuals made a comment about the female figure, wondering if changing it would change the meaning of the advertisement.

Next the *1991 Ministry of Health advertisement*:

<https://youtu.be/HzA7wgrhhjk?si=JAYOfemk4-PygJn>

While the female protagonist is doing her skincare, the narrator says that she is not just making herself pretty, but she is also preventing skin cancer. While on one hand this promotes a health message, on the other hand it also highlights certain gender stereotypes. Indeed, female healthcare is linked to physical appearance, reinforcing the stereotype of idealized femininity. The ad also places male authority in the hands of the doctor, suggesting men are seen as the primary sources of medical knowledge, while women's role is more passive. Lastly, female emotion is contrasted with male competence, where the woman is portrayed as emotional, while the male doctor is shown as a rational and competent expert.

Again, if we take a look at our survey, only one out of ten Italian respondents noticed the stereotype, while the majority focused on the importance of cancer prevention. Same results can be seen while looking at the international survey: only one respondent was aware of the stereotype, and made a comment underlining the fact that the ad mainly focused on the female figure rather than on health issues.

Entering the new millennium, we have the **2001 “The Euro is Coming”** campaign by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers:

https://youtu.be/rWP_BLe-XJ4?si=k5-ioCb71sSesIa7

Here, the stereotype associates grocery shopping with women, suggesting traditional gender roles in our society. Indeed, in the whole spot no men appear.

Again, only one out of ten Italian respondents recognized the bias, while most did not notice anything in particular. Some stated that portraying women at the local market was a “clever choice”, as it symbolizes an Italian tradition, and could make the introduction of the Euro more relatable and acceptable to Italians. One response, in particular, stood out to us - a participant pointed out that the only thing he noticed was a lack of respect towards elderly people.

International individuals gave us almost the same results, as all ten respondents did not notice any stereotype. They all mainly focused on the shift from the Lira to Euro, taking the ad as a humorous one.

Next is another **Ministry of Economy advertisement, from 2002**:

<https://youtu.be/xCrxjlcwAi8?si=sadWZO9ISJ3s648y>

This ad aims to reassure Italians on the money change. Specifically, in the ad is shown a son bringing the bills to his father. Again, there is a clear portrayal of traditional gender roles. The father is sitting on the couch watching tv, while the mother is seen in the background while preparing the table, and staying behind the male figure as he reads the bills. This reinforces the stereotype that women are responsible for household chores, while men are involved in more central or passive activities, like managing finances. Secondly, the visibility and protagonist focus on the male figure. He is the focus when it comes to handling the bills, while the mother is in the background in every scene.

Again, only one out of ten participants noticed the stereotypes. On one hand, the majority of the respondents noted that the ad is misleading, as it suggests that nothing really changes, which isn't true. On the other hand, several people mentioned that the use of irony helps shifting the focus and making the message more engaging. Only one of them affirmed that the family context reassures viewers, as the spot presents a typical Italian family that many feel connected to.

Taking into account international responses, only two out of ten were able to identify the presence of some stereotypes, while the others again mainly depicted the advertisement as a humorous one.

Entering the 2010s, we have the **2014 Fertility Day campaign**, by the Ministry of Health.



Firstly, by taking a look at this ad, we can see the slogan: “Beauty has no age, Fertility does”, which ties a woman's values to her reproductive ability, completely ignoring male fertility and creating a sort of one-sided narrative. It also implies that fertility is essential to a woman's identity. Secondly, the campaign puts significant social pressure on women, suggesting that

fertility is a priority they must address within a limited timeframe.

The visual also plays a key role: the model reflects the stereotype of the “ideal woman” - young, adhering to Western beauty standards, and posed maternally with her hand on her belly. Finally, the campaign lacks inclusivity, ignoring women who face infertility or choose not to have children.

In this case, four out of ten Italian participants noticed the stereotypes, and criticized the ad for being judgmental and exclusionary, while others focused on its broader message about fertility awareness, overlooking these biases entirely. One in particular stated that is a right message to spread to the citizens.

On the other hand, half of the international respondents were able to identify the stereotypes: they were able to notice that the ad “seemed to put a sort of pressure on women about fertility”. Others stated that the ad may be too harsh and could cause misperceptions.

Finally, the *2016 INAIL Campaign against domestic accidents*:

<https://youtu.be/NdwezRMN0SI?si=Ut2Q9ZM4s8lA2Zyh>

This campaign perpetuated the idea that household tasks are a woman’s responsibility. In the ad, a female fencer is first depicted as an athlete, but then transforms into a housewife, with her sword turning into a feather duster. An interesting part is the beginning of the spot - as the narrator both addresses housewives and househusbands, yet a woman is the protagonist of the second part.

Half of the Italian respondents noticed this bias, and questioned why the focus was solely on women, noticing the incoherence between the narrator addressing both genders and the choice of the female protagonist. The other half, however, overlooked the stereotype or suggested that the spot was inclusive, as at the beginning the narrator addresses both genders.

Different results can be seen looking at the international responses, as only two out of ten participants were able to identify stereotypes; those two, in particular, pointed out that because housewives were used as protagonists, also men could have been used as examples. The other eight participants mainly focus on the structure of the ad, stating that it was an understandable one, underlining the importance of safety and awareness of household accidents.

Based on the list of stereotypes, which was briefly explained in the second part of the survey, after the initial viewing of the campaigns, three Italian participants did not perceive any

stereotypes, three recognized them in many ads, while four identified them in only a few ads. When asked whether they thought those elements were stereotypes or artistic choices, eight people regarded them as stereotypes, while only two viewed them as artistic choices. Finally, when asked if they had noticed a change over the years and greater inclusivity, with a rating from one to five, the Italian respondents did not observe any significant improvement or decline.

Slightly different results can be seen with International participants: when asked, in the second part of the survey, two of them did not perceive any stereotypes, three recognized them in many ads, while five of them in only a few ads. When asked whether they thought those elements were stereotypes or artistic choices, six respondents out of ten regarded them as stereotypes, while the others as artistic choices. Finally, it is interesting to point out that international participants, when asked if they had noticed a change over time, observed a slight improvement over the years.

To sum up the results of the survey, we can say that, overall, over 50% of participants did not recognize any gender stereotypes in the ads. Overall, according to Italian participants, there hasn't been significant change, neither positive nor negative, while international ones find some positive changes. Also, only after reading the explanations of the advertisements, most of them became aware of it.

It is interesting to note that the majority of them were able to identify gender stereotypes in the last two advertisements. It is intriguing because perhaps, in the last two, the stereotypes are more visible, while before they were more subtle.

After administering the survey, we expanded our research by conducting follow-up interviews with individuals who had recognized gender stereotypes in the advertisements. The goal was to explore their backgrounds and see if there was a common thread in their reasoning behind identifying the stereotypes. The results revealed a significant gender disparity in stereotype recognition. Notably, none of the male participants identified the stereotypes, whereas several women did. Interestingly, all the women who recognized the stereotypes reported having recently encountered discussions related to gender issues and feminism, primarily on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. This suggests that their awareness of gender stereotypes may have been influenced or heightened by their exposure to contemporary feminist discourse on these platforms.

As already mentioned before, we feel it is important to highlight some limitations of our research, such as the quantity of data analyzed, obviously far from sufficient for a more detailed research, mainly due to limited time and resources. Another factor could be cultural elements,

which may have influenced the different responses between Italians and International participants.

Conclusions

Finally, we believe that our research demonstrates how the principles and objectives of Section J-2 of the Beijing Platform have not yet been achieved. In fact, we can see how gender stereotypes are still deeply embedded in our society, and that so far, there has been very limited progress following the Beijing Platform, especially regarding messages and actions shared by the government.

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