

# Influence of Benevolent Sexism on the Stereotype of Women

—Take Laundry and Automotive Advertisement as Examples

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## ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has become a severe problem with the development of digital media, including advertising. Although women appearing in advertisements now have multi-dimensional characteristics than before, gender sexism still exists in today's advertisements seriously. This research attempts to discuss the formation of the new form of sexism—benevolent sexism—and its development in advertisements, relationships and changes to hostile sexism, its effects on stereotypes about women and possible suggestions for future attempts. This research is based on the methods of literature study and case studies of laundry and automotive commercials.

**Keywords:** *Benevolent Sexism, women stereotypes, laundry advertisements, automotive advertisements*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality in advertisements has evolved in this century. Rather than insulting women directly, advertisements have become a way to spread negative gender prejudice subtly and contribute to benevolent sexism that makes women feel protected and happy initially, but is stereotyping women. Benevolent sexism creates a negative loop for its audience. Women view and accept the stereotypes hidden in these advertisements potentially and gladly, but the rigid stereotypes are reinforced simultaneously. After the quantitative accumulation of gladly accepted stereotypes, benevolent sexism formed and amplified, which will turn to hostile sexism evoking distinct and severe discrimination on women, including direct verbal or physical attacks. This research aims to discover the new form of sexism in nowadays' advertisements and focuses specifically on laundry and car commercials and analyses how they evoke benevolent sexism, what is the transition from benevolent sexism to hostile sexism, and the further effects on women stereotypes. The research also gives suggestions on how to create a healthy advertisement industry and reduce or even eliminate potential sexism in advertisements.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous researches have demonstrated severe gender inequality in advertisements. Firstly, portrayal in advertisements of females and males are greatly deviated from the real situation. Kantar reported in 2015 that 76% of female consumers and 71% of male consumers believe the way men and women are depicted in advertising is "completely out of touch" [1]. Secondly, males'

dominance in advertisements is the main feature of potential gender inequality problem. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media worked with Google found that the amount of actresses in commercials almost don't have increment when compared with male characters from 2006 to 2016 after analysing more than 2,000 English-language advertisements. In 2006, 33.9% of the characters were women. In 2016, the number had barely increased and reached 36.9% [2]. However, the amount of screen time that men had was four times more than that of women, and men spoke about seven times as often as women did. While ads featuring only men accounted for about a quarter of all ads, those that featured solely women made up 5 percent of the total. A 2016 report from Lloyds Banking Group also proves the distinct difference in female and male characters in advertisements. It found that about merely one-third of characters in ads were women, who often occupied roles related with seduction, beauty and mother hood, but lack the opportunity to be the embodiment of power [3].

## 3. ANALYSIS OF BENEVOLENT SEXISM

### 3.1. Psychological Definition of Benevolent Sexism

Benevolent sexism belongs to ambivalent sexism. Ambivalent sexism presumes that sexism has two components — hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism reflects overtly negative evaluations, comments and stereotypes of one gender. Conversely, benevolent sexism symbolizes assertions of one gender that are subjectively positive initially, but are harming the audience and gender equality more broadly. In the

advertisements industry, benevolent sexism refers to creating a particular phenomenon that is easily and comfortably accepted by people, both female and male, but leads to emphasized gender stereotypes.

### **3.2. Changes in Sexism in Advertisements**

In the past, companies would employ gender stereotypes overtly, with which to target particular groups of potential consumers and therefore to maximize profits. Hostile sexism appeared in those advertisements, indicating one gender's weakness without modification or using one gender's stereotyped features to appeal to targeted consumers in displeased methods. For instance, the Mini automatic published a poster depicting a young woman with awkward movements and anxious emotions driving an Mini automatic. A text positioned below the picture says "The Mini Automobile. For Simple Driving". This poster meets the public's stereotype of women's inability and nervousness of driving and regards female consumers as potential targeted objects to persuade them to stay away from manual cars and choose Mini's automatic, which allows them to "lie down, close your eyes and think Mini".

However, today's advertisements make the birth of benevolent sexism possible. With the appearance of gender equality related policies, such as UK has started to ban any type of advertisements evoking sexism in social media since 2019, and the public's growing awareness, companies are forced to refuse using gender rules straightforwardly to attract or target their audience. However, gender stereotypes in advertisements have transformed from explicit to implicit, therefore facilitate the born of benevolent sexism. For example, in February 2019, clothes company Boden printed texts about boys are adventurous and like bikes and mischief, while girls love flowers in one of their posters for children's wear. The primary purpose of this poster was to indicate that Boden's clothes were well designed to satisfy boys and girls. However, Boden was forced to make an apology after a wave of online criticism saying it was stereotyping boys and girls to adventurous and tender personalities respectively. What is more, on February 15th, 2020, Sony China posted a statement "if your girlfriend asks you about lipstick colors, just defeat her with the wide range of camera lens" on Weibo (a Chinese social media like Twitter). Rather than directly illustrating one gender's weakness, this advertisement shows women stereotyped personalities and hobbies that females cannot be advantageous in photography, which is considered as a traditional occupation for males, and thus take women away from it.

### **3.3. Effects of Benevolent Sexism on Advertisements**

When females first see advertisements containing benevolent sexism, most of them feel that their preferences have been considered and gladly accept stereotyped tender personalities or stereotyped limitations. Companies take advantage of this psychology, and produce more commercials covering implicit gender inequality by creating a world full of "ideal" stereotypes. With the large quantitatively accumulation of benevolent sexism comes a transition to hostile sexism again, smearing the characteristics of women directly and even including physical attacks in unpleasing approaches.

Advertisements need to be the reflection of real life, rather than using biased opinions or stereotyping specific groups to win maximum profits. On October 1st, 2018, The Unstereotype Alliance of UN announced the research results of a new global study conducted by The Female Quotient and Ipsos after surveying 14,700 men and women aged 16 to 64 in 28 countries. Their conclusions are followed. First, advertising plays a crucial role in how people regard others in reality. The researchers found that 76% of consumers hold the idea that "advertising has a lot of power to shape how people perceive each another". Second, the fictional world portrayed by advertisements do not correspond with the real situations: 72% claim that "most advertising does not reflect the world around me", 63% claim that "I don't see myself represented in most advertising", and 60% agree that "I don't see my community of friends, family, and acquaintances represented accurately in most advertising" [4]. Consequently, such distinct differences between scenarios in advertisements and real life may be the initial cause for the biased or distorted opinions. Hence, the action of promoting products by employing or establishing gender stereotypes is not recommendable.

## **4. CASE ANALYSIS**

### **4.1. Targets of Investigation**

This research chooses laundry and automotive commercials as targets for investigation of benevolent sexism for two reasons. Firstly, laundry and automotive advertisements are representative of the overall advertisements' markets. Detergent advertising has been one of the longest TV history [5]. In addition, investment in car advertisements takes a large amount in the whole advertisement expenditure, demonstrating its significant position. The digital advertisements revenue in the U.S. automotive sector is expected to grow to about 5.3 billion U.S. dollars by 2021 [6]. Secondly, laundry and automatic advertisements have been dominated by traditional gender tendency since the existence of digital advertisements. For laundry advertisements, after analyzing 20,000 advertisements from 9,560 brands in 43 countries,

Kantar's Link Ad Testing model discovered that 98 % of baby, laundry and household cleaner commercials are targeted at women. While most of the laundry advertisements are played by female actresses. On the contrary, commercials focusing on automobiles usually invite males as players. This research chooses these two historically stereotyped advertisements' types as targeted objects, illustrating the benevolent sexism in nowadays' digital commercials, its development, transition to hostile sexism, and effects on gender-biased opinions.

#### **4.2. Laundry Advertisements**

Gender stereotypes in laundry advertisements can be transformed subtly to stereotyped expectations in reality that women are supposed to do more chores while receive less respect. In 2007, for example, Clorox, a company producing cleaning products, stated that in no uncertain terms that laundry was, and always has been a woman's job. The aside in that advertisements also says that "laundries are not new, your mother, your grandmother, they all did the laundry", and "maybe even a man or two" had done it at some point. For the frames of this thirty-four-second video, they keeps showing a woman's busy and sophisticated movements of sending dirty clothes to the washing machine, while a male character driving a red car back home and children playing around in the room. The surrounding settings and movements of children and husbands in the family are keeping changing, but the female is doing laundry works all the time as if she is separated from her world, and her only job in this family is to do the laundry. Besides, in 2013, Tide still informed us that mothers were supposed to quit work to be with the kids, and also that caring about laundry was inherently passed down to women from the previous generations.

Detergent is a product that has historically ignored the fact that every gender needs to uses it. Based on these advertisements, the audience will naturally receive the message that the only people using laundry detergent are heterosexual white women. Therefore, new women stereotypes are created, and already-established ones are reinforced.

#### **4.3. Car Commercials**

The narratives of mainstream automotive advertisements still show men remain in the driving seat, while female characters as passengers, who lack of autonomy and power to control the car. The message of women is being protected delivered in automotive advertisements is the beginning of the benevolent sexism. 51% of drivers are women, but car brands continue to treat them as secondary passengers, which create and amplify the stereotype that women should be protected or directed by men sitting in the driver's seat. This kind of prejudice is categorized as benevolent sexism, because instead of hurting females, it

shows consideration for women, who seemed are not capable of driving. According to research from Different Spin, the automotive experience innovation lab from GoodRebels.com, over 50% of women (56%) feel patronized by car advertising [7]. The transitional point in automatic advertisements took place in an Audi film of its second-hand cars in 2017. The film begins with a wedding, where the bridegroom's mother disrupts the romantic process when the bride and the bridegroom are saying their marriage vows. The mother quickly comes to the bride, yanks her nose horizontally, pulls her ears and forces the young woman to open her mouse to observe her white teeth, as if the beautiful bride is an object that does not have any dignity. After a thorough "torture", this mother-in-law poses an "OK" gesture with her right hand to the bridegroom to prove that she thinks the bride's physical features are good and her approval for this marriage, before her eyes suddenly move to the bride's breasts. After that, a red Audi car appears with a text "an important decision must be made carefully". Finally, this advertisements ends with a pointer to the Audi second-hand car sales webpage. The film first indicated that the decision of buying a second-hand car is as important as holding a wedding and officially start a marriage, and then puts forward that the physical examination of the bride conducted by the mother-in-law is a metaphor that comprehensive inspection is also required of purchasing cars. This advertisement chose the female side in the marriage as the one who is physically attacked, rather than the male side, in order to cater to the existing stereotype that bride's physical features have great importance in a peaceful marriage. Direct physical attacks appeared in this film, suggesting it is no longer the implicit benevolent sexism, but the explicit hostile one.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1. Benevolent Sexism in Other Advertisement types and future trends**

This research analyses benevolent sexism particularly in laundry and automotive advertisements, which are two main types of commercials traditionally dominating by women and men respectively. But in other fields of advertisement benevolent still exists. For example, jingdong.com printed "if women don't wear make-up, how can others distinguish them from the men" in its cosmetics packages, which seemed to act as a role to take care of women's desire of beauty, but corresponding to female consumers' stereotyped making up habits made them passive accept this biased opinion and amplified the prejudice. What is more, an air conditioning specialist Not Just Cooling had a poster with the text that "your wife is HOT, better get the air conditioning fixed". By using two different meanings of "hot", the company Not Just Cooling made women's physical features as a tool indicating the functions of the air conditioning.

Benevolent sexism exists in various categories of advertisements, normally through emphasizing extreme features or habits of females and making companies' specific products or the functions of products relying on those women's stereotypes.

## 5.2. Suggested Solutions

Companies should not make advertisements that simply focus on women's beauty standards, personality expectations or other inherent stereotypes, or surrounding them with extreme greatness or distorted spirits of self-scarifying to intentionally impose unrealistic tags to women in real life, and therefore maximize their business profits. Fortunately, some advertisers have begun to identify the commercial advantages of rejecting gender stereotypes through publishing depictions that more accurately reflect their consumer base [8]. Encouraging more advertisers, companies and the public to give more multidimensional and realistic women characters in the advertisements industry will be needed.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Due to the reason that the author of this research is still in high school, the time for doing this research is not enough as well as insufficient energy to investigate benevolent sexism in other advertisements to produce extra concrete suggestions. Therefore, future investigation and producing statistic data about benevolent sexism in advertisements are needed.

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