

# Food advertisement and gender stereotypes on Austrian television

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## Summary

The goal of this paper is the analysis of food advertisements on Austrian television as to the subject of gender specific stereotypes. Over a two-week-period, 45 hours of television footage were recorded, coded, analyzed, and evaluated using seven screening categories. The analysis revealed that men, in comparison to women, are frequently depicted as performing some type of work and are often older (> 50 years), or of middle age (35–50 years of age). Food, such as meat and beer, are more commonly associated with men; milk, coffee and tea rather with women. In addition, women are often portrayed as young (< 35 years of age), in stable relationships and shown while performing housework. As a result, gender manifestations are evident in food advertisements and implications regarding stereotypical role models referring to dietary identities and food communication can be derived.

**Keywords:** food advertisement, television, gender stereotypes, gender, marketing

## Introduction

Eating habits are formed as a result of diverse societal influences. They develop as a whole throughout one's lifetime and are considered highly complex [1]. Modern television, together with other media (print, radio, internet), plays a major role in data dissemination [2] and contributes to the broad presentation of dietary stereotypes.

## Gender as community forming category

Different demands of men and women for products and services have prompted many corporate divisions to conduct research and are incorporating their findings in technology development, marketing and planning. Marketing strategies, and/or product designs are

used to reinforce gender stereotypes and consequently manifest societal male/female perceptions of product use and are accordingly applied in their promotion.

The orientation toward these societal norms is evident in product designs, including food products. Numerous studies point out differences in male and female eating behavior [3, 4], but do not elaborate on the influence on diet these standards have in product advertisement and package design. Symbolic gender order reinforces values and therefore clearly influences male and female behavior [5].

Gender hierarchy impacts the depiction of men and women in media and advertising. Media representation of men and women are rather ambivalent: gender-equitable portrayals of various domestic and non-domestic situations are still absent. In media, feminine presentation is still associated with thinness and youth culture [6].

## Doing Gender

The terms "sex" and "gender" have been utilized by gender researchers since the 1980s and spotlight that gender differences are not exclusively defined by biology, but by social and societal parameters as well [7].

Gender research's concept of doing gender aims to clarify that gender and the perception of how men and women „are“ is a societal construct, can be deconstructed by society, and is therefore not immutable. The concept of „doing gender“ can mainly be contributed to Candace West and

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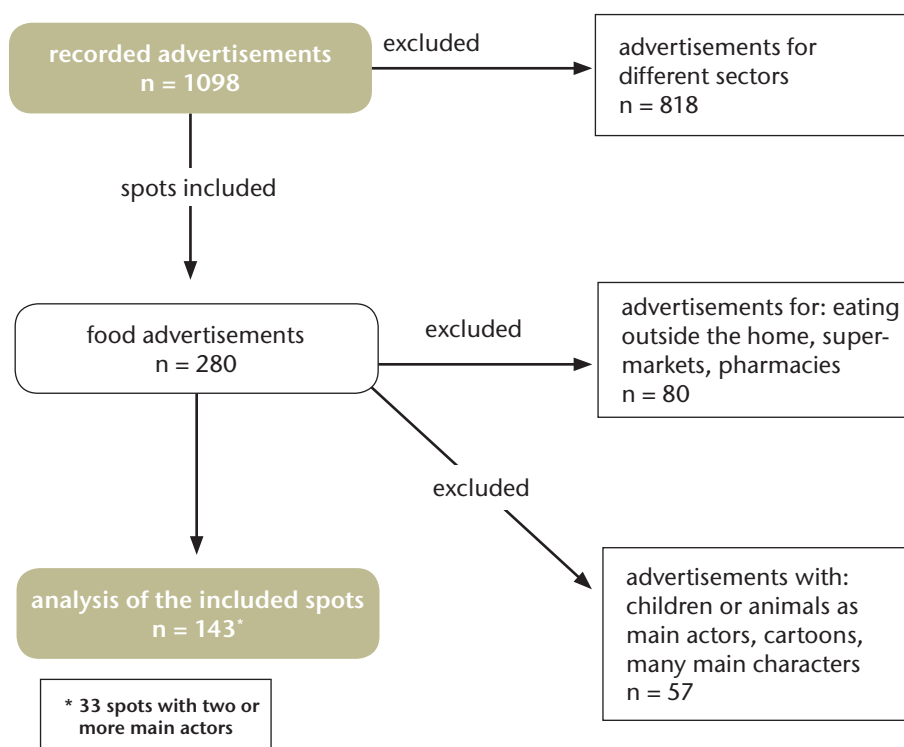


Figure 1: Selection criteria – flow chart

Don H. ZIMMERMAN (1987). Both perceive gender as a social construct, an attribute in societal situations, rather than a person's individual trait [8].

#### Food advertising and gender aspects

Media plays an important role in conveying messages, expectations and images which serve the social construct of gender identity. Television imparts normative, social and cultural information to a broad (heterogenic) audience. While watching food advertisements on television, perceptions how both men and women live and consume food become apparent [9].

While watching food commercials, the reinforced dietary identities become clear rather quickly. Austrians averagely watch 2.5 hours of television a day [10], while Germans approximately watch 3.7 hours [11]. The 1:1 depiction of gender roles can be attributed to television

commercials. FLICK and ROSE assume that precisely this combination of images and individuals are entering into mutual interaction [12]. For example, they show that during commercials, women are commonly depicted in domestic settings, whereas men are more often shown in public. The female environment can also be used exclusively for eating – namely, to fortify health. Again, these images perpetuate numerous male/female dietary habits that have been identified by nutritional science studies on gender: females eat healthier than males [13]. This contributes indirectly to the construction of gender roles which ultimately are reflected in living conditions. Therefore, the connection and influence of food advertisement and gender specific awareness becomes apparent.

On international level, little research exists specifically with reference to gender aspects of food marketing

[12]. Next to some English language studies which investigated gender stereotypes in food marketing on private and public television stations [14–16], even fewer research papers focusing on food emerge from German-speaking countries of central Europe [13, 17]. Research of single products in relation to gender context hardly exists [18].

Classic role models of men and women are found in some studies on the topic of television commercials in Europe and the USA. Masculinity is often associated with men as being authoritarian, working outdoors, whereas femininity is frequently attached to domestic settings. Women are more often presented as newlyweds, or housewives depending on men [18].

#### Gender Marketing – Gender Food

Companies use gender marketing – the intentional targeting of products to men and women in commercials – as a method to boost buyer's motivation and appeal. Gender marketing's sole purpose is to appeal specifically to men or women.

Gender marketing research of food advertisement is especially exciting, since the allocation of food items according to gender really affects male and female buying behavior. Consequently, Austrian men eat 54 % more meat and sausage products. Women, on the other hand, choose more fruit, vegetables and whole grain products [4]. Food producers and advertisers use this direct gender marketing approach in order to achieve increased sales.

#### Objectives

The main focus of this article is to examine food advertisements on Austrian television regarding potential differences in the portrayal of archetypal masculinity and femininity. Therefore, a categorical analysis of advertisement design and content is utilized.

## Methodology

Data collection occurred during two consecutive weeks in April and May of 2014. For five days per week, material was recorded from two television stations, each starting with the preliminary programs at 6 pm and followed by the main shows until 10:30 pm (public station ORF2, market share 21.5 %; premium station PULS 4, market share 3.5 %) [19]). At least one weekend day was recorded. Of the 45 hours of recorded data, an ad hoc sampling of defined selection criteria filtered for food commercials (♦ Figure 1). A total of 143 commercials were categorically analyzed for content. Excluded were: a) commercials for restaurants, supermarkets, pharmaceuticals; b) commercials with more than two actors (compare [16]).

The coding system according to MCARTHUR and RESKO [20] was used for content analysis, comparing the research outcome with international results. The systematic content analysis examined seven different categories:

- 1) Appearance frequency of leading male or female actors
- 2) Product category (food and beverages): sweets (chocolate, cookies, etc.), refreshments (sodas, mineral waters, etc.), beer (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), dairy products (yogurt, yogurt drinks, ice cream), processed food (pizza, instant noodles, etc.), functional food (enriched food like probiotic yogurt, fruit juice fortified with vitamins, etc., but no pharmaceutical products!), alcoholic mixed drinks, savory snacks (chips, popcorn, etc.), bread and cereal-based products (breads, cakes, etc.), wine, champagne, spirits, meat and sausage products, baby food (supplementary nutrition, baby food, etc.), coffee and tea (powder and ready-to-consume products), breakfast cereals (muesli, cornflakes, etc.)
- 3) Voice-over: man, woman, together (both genders)

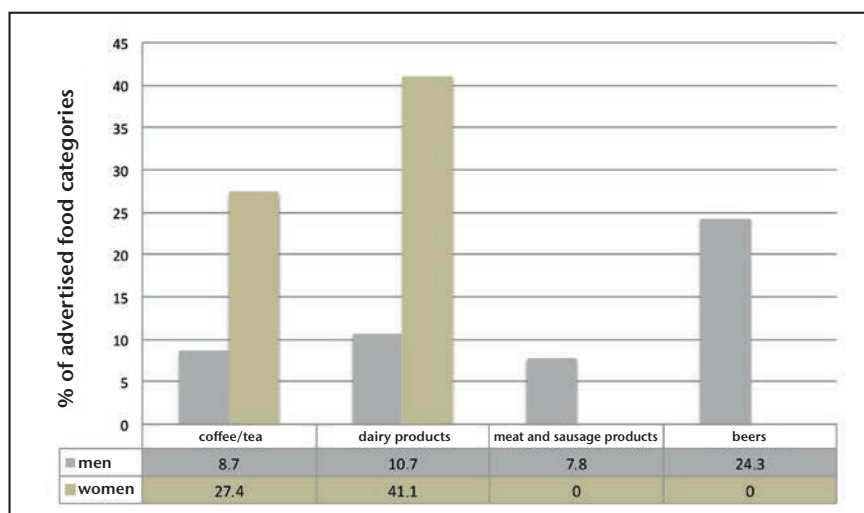


Figure 2: Differences in the presentation of food categories comparing men to women (n = 103)

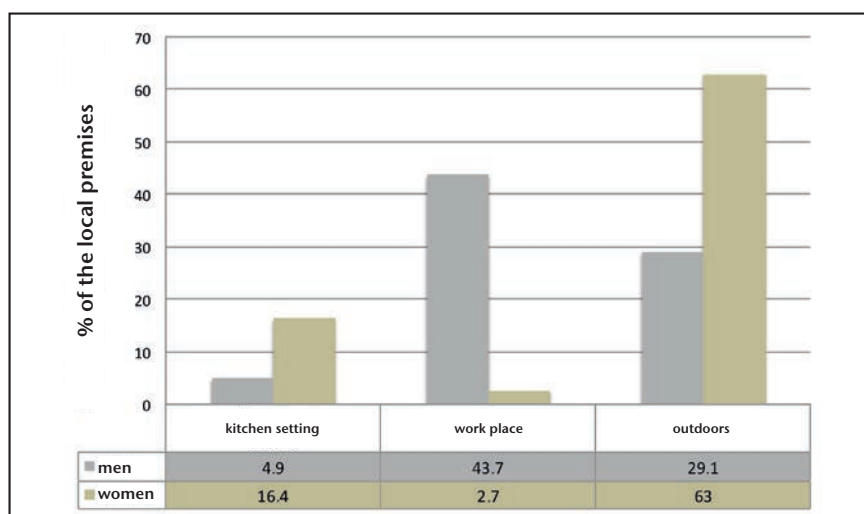


Figure 3: Differences depicting local premises as compared to men and women (n = 140)

- 4) Setting: kitchen, domestic setting except kitchen, work place, outdoors  
Miscellaneous setting (i.e. imaginary setting)
- 5) Age: < 35 years of age, 35–50 years of age, > 50 years of age
- 6) Role models: Relationship: (husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend), parent, housewife/househusband, employee, interviewer or narrator, product expert, miscellaneous
- 7) Product argumentation: scientific reason (data + facts), non-scientific reason (opinion, little product knowledge), no reason

## Statistical analysis

To analyze the categorical variables, chi-squared tests were used to determine differences in occurrences of single variables (subcategories) between males and females. Level of significance was determined at 5 %.

## Findings

In total, more commercials were aired on the premium station PULS4 (n = 640) than on the public station ORF2 (n = 458). Of 22.5 hours of raw material aired on the public sta-

		Authors' research sample N = 143		ESPINAR-RUIZ and GONZÁLEZ-DÍAZ [14] (2012), N= 407		FURNHAM (2008) <sup>1</sup> ,
		female	male	female	male	female
Leading Role	n	73	103	216	191	33
	%	<b>41.5</b>	<b>58.5</b>	53	47	<b>73</b>
Voice-over	n	48	88	118	289	26
	%	<b>34.5</b>	<b>63.3</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>71</b>	57.6
Age (< 35 years of age)	n	50	6	214	130	16
	%	<b>68.5</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>52.6</b>	<b>32</b>	36.4
Age (35–50 years of age)	n	23	85	50	22	23
	%	<b>31.5</b>	<b>82.5</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>51.5</b>
Age (> 50 years of age)	n	0	12	7	7	5
	%	<b>0</b>	<b>11.7</b>	1.7	1.8	<b>12.1</b>
Relationship (spouse/ boyfriend/girlfriend)	n	73	103	–	–	–
	%	<b>41.5</b>	<b>58.5</b>	–	–	–
Role model: employee	n	48	88	–	–	–
	%	<b>34.5</b>	<b>63.3</b>	–	–	–
Setting: kitchen	n	12	5	121	77	–
	%	<b>16.4</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>29.9</b>	<b>18.8</b>	–
Setting: work place	n	2	45	23	26	4
	%	<b>2.7</b>	<b>43.7</b>	5.7	6.3	9.1
Setting: outdoors	n	46	30	101	140	–
	%	<b>63</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>24.7</b>	<b>34.5</b>	–

Table 1: Significant differences of own research sample, compared to three other studies [14–16]

<sup>1</sup> Recordings from Chinese food advertisements

<sup>2</sup> Recordings from Western food advertisements

<sup>3</sup> Night/evening recordings

<sup>2</sup> Recordings during the day

– = no data

bold = significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ )

tion, 110 food advertisements (31 % of all aired commercials) were identified. 62 of these complied with the analytical prerequisite. During 22.5 hours, the premium station PULS4 showed 170 food advertisements (36 % of all aired commercials). Of these, 81 commercials met the analytical criteria. A total of 143 food advertisements (ORF2 and PULS4) were considered for further analysis.

### Leading actors

In 110 advertisements one actor was cast for the main role, whereas two actors shared the leading role in 33 spots. Therefore, 176 (=110 + 33

x 2) leading actors were identified. Men had significantly more leading roles (58.8 %) compared to women (41.5 %). Men were more often engaged in voice-over roles (63.5 %) than women (34.5 %) ( $\chi^2 [1] = 5.11$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) (♦ Table 1).

### Food

The categories of alcoholic mixed drinks, salty snacks, breads and pastries, wine, sparkling wine, and spirits were not included in the analysis; these products did not appear in the advertisements. Beer was exclusively offered by men ( $\chi^2 [1] = 20.65$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), along with

meat products and sausage products ( $\chi^2 [1] = 5.94$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Dairy products, on the other hand ( $\chi^2 [1] = 22.12$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), as well as coffee and tea ( $\chi^2 [1] = 10.81$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), were promoted significantly more by women than men (♦ Table 2). When presenting confectionaries, soft drinks, ready-made meals, functional food and baby food, the differences were nominal.

### Portrayal of gender stereotypes

In comparison to men, women were portrayed considerably more likely to be in a relationship as wife or girlfriend ( $\chi^2 [1] = 6.09$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

and Li [15] N = 45	FURNHAM and Li [15] (2008) <sup>2</sup> , N = 45		ARONOVSKY and FURNHAM [16] (2008) <sup>3</sup> , N = 97		ARONOVSKY and FURNHAM [16] (2008) <sup>4</sup> , N = 84	
male	female	male	female	male	female	male
12	29	16	62	35	53	31
<b>27</b>	<b>64.4</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>37</b>
30	23	37	64	50	46	54
66.7	<b>51.7</b>	<b>81.3</b>	66.1	51.4	54.7	64.5
15	12	28	51	3	44	8
33.3	<b>27.6</b>	<b>62.5</b>	<b>52.2</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>52.8</b>	<b>9.7</b>
11	29	17	5	55	14	35
<b>25</b>	<b>65.5</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>41.9</b>
19	3	0	–	–	–	–
<b>41.7</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>0</b>	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
4	3	11	–	–	–	–
<b>8.3</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>25</b>	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–
–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Men were noticeably shown in work situations (39,8 %) compared to women; the examined advertisements showed no women were illustrated working outside the home ( $\chi^2 [1] = 37.88$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). When portraying men and women as parent, housewife/husband, expert, interviewer or narrator, the differences were insignificant (♦ Table 1). The settings exhibited compelling differences: women were more often depicted in the kitchen ( $\chi^2 [1] = 6.57$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and outdoors ( $\chi^2 [1] = 19.99$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) compared to men. On the other hand, men were seen more frequently at work ( $\chi^2 [1] = 36.60$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; ♦ Figure 3). Other domestic premises, such as the living room or bedroom showed no variations ( $\chi^2 [1] = 0.24$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ). Furthermore, women were often depicted to be younger ( $< 35$  years of age) than men ( $\chi^2 [1] = 77.34$ ;

$p < 0.01$ ). Men were clearly categorized aged 35–50 ( $\chi^2 [1] = 46.90$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) and older than 50 years of age ( $\chi^2 [1] = 9.13$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

Our study examined how men and women are portrayed in food commercials on Austrian television and their perpetuation of gender roles. In contrast to other products such as automobiles, technology, hygiene and household products, food advertisement had not been seen as evidently gender specific, but rather as gender neutral [21]. Therefore, food commercials had rarely been subject to gender research [22]. In the last few years, the subject of „gender and diet“ has initiated intensive research. Sociologists, nutritional scientists, gender and cultur-

al studies researchers concluded in their studies, that diet and nutrition have to be discussed in the context of gender.

Some food items are associated with feminine, others with masculine characteristics. For example, fruit and vegetables are “peaceful”, or “non-dominant”, whereas meat for example is associated with masculinity and attributes such as strength, virility and power: meat as the quintessential “male meal” [23].

This is reflected in consumer surveys, which have repeatedly shown that certain food items are more likely to be consumed by either women or men [3]. Food items such as beer and meat have been associated with masculine characteristics [24], and our research confirms that they were mainly promoted by men. Moreover, women were depicted younger ( $< 35$  years of age), men

on the other hand frequently belonged to the age group of > 50 years of age: the so called best-ager group. Best-agers are defined as having desirable characteristics, such as experience, trustworthiness and financial security. The mature, older, and at the same time reliable man is deployed in food advertising to convey these values [25]. Older women, on the other hand, show up less frequently. They appear only rarely in advertising; females are assessed according to their appearance and hereby facilitate the standards of youthfulness and attractiveness [26]. The frequent portrayal of young women matches these ideals; at the same time obscures a further motive which is often connected to women on the issue of nutrition and diet: namely health and vitality.

Furthermore, men were frequently seen at work and women often in domestic settings. This classic gender role definition and the clear attribution of „provider role“ to women (household, food supplier) and men (work, money supplier) comes to light, especially in connection with nutrition. This point illustrates how advertisement accepts ritualized male and female behavior and conventionalizes it once again [27, 28]. The gendering of everyday acts (depiction of actors, settings, roles) and things (food promoted by men vs. women) in the commercials examined in this study shows that doing gender in food commercials on Austrian television perpetuates classic gender roles.

### Limitations

Due to missing reliability testing, the presented data should be interpreted with caution. Also, seasonal variants of aired commercials have not been gathered [14, 15, 18], and preceding television programs and their influence on subsequent commercials have not been analyzed [29, 30]. Additionally, in this sample, the number of commercials of particular food groups, such as baby food,

functional food, ready-made meals and soft drinks were very small ( $\leq 5$ ). Due to limited numbers, it can therefore not be ruled out that potential differences between groups were undiscovered.

### Conclusion

Food commercials on Austrian television convey classic male and female role models and transmit stereotypical gender associations vis-à-vis certain food items. This rather conservative characterization of male and female roles on the subject of nutrition seems to ignore the important societal and domestic progress made in the last decades, but contributes to the viewers' solidification of traditional gender roles, which ultimately shape once more nutritional habits and everyday living.



## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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