

On the representation of masculinity in the current Romanian advertising discourse

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A central element of economic culture, advertising is a form of communication through which information is conveyed, attracting the recipient's attention, the issuer's intention being to elicit a response or reaction from the consumer. The social dimension of advertising is largely determined by its ability to reflect the needs, aspirations, and desires of the public. In order to achieve its persuasive aim, advertising constructs a spectacle to which stereotypes contribute. These allow for the construction and reception of easily identifiable schemas which, through familiarity, create mental comfort for the target audience (Moraru 2009). This paper focuses on gender stereotypes, specifically on the image of masculinity, as it appears in recent advertisements broadcast on Romanian television channels. It is well known that Romanian society has long been dominated by a patriarchal vision, centred on the image of the secure, authoritarian man, while femininity has been associated with fragility and vulnerability. However, it can be observed that the current advertising discourse increasingly employs the anti-stereotype (Moraru 2009) as a persuasive strategy, undermining through humour and irony the established image of the male hero.

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1. Introduction

Viewed from the angle of a dictionary definition, virility might entail three perspectives: the first two associate virility with the physical and sexual attributes typical of the adult male —“a set of physical, mental, and sexual characteristics of the adult man, that which constitutes the male sex, and that which relates to sexual vigour”— while the third considers two abstract traits: masculine energy and courage (www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais).

The foundational idea of the superiority of virility has been reinforced over centuries through mythology, imagery, symbolism, religion, and science. In what Olivia Gazalé describes as a “virile cosmos”, an ordering of the world (2017, 18), the

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woman, naturally programmed for motherhood, is loving, fragile, inconsistent, dominated by emotions, and sometimes irrational, whereas the man is naturally self-controlled, courageous, dominant, active, and always capable of reasoning and coping in any situation. In this universe, a paradox emerges: it is not just the woman who suffers, long trapped in an inferior value system, but the man does too, as he collapses under the weight of a model he himself has created.

The last century was marked by devastating wars and serious economic crises. The early 21st century also appears unsettled, with a growing sense of insecurity and distrust within the contemporary Western society. Consequently, a different image of the man emerges, one more concerned with comfort and security than with risk and adventure. At the same time, the emancipation of women constantly undermines the image of the man who used to be the breadwinner. Thus, the traditional division whereby men are recognized for what they do, and women for what they are, proves outdated in the fragile contemporary world.

This re-evaluation or realignment of family roles could not leave out advertising, whose social dimension is determined by "the circulation of discourse in the public and social space, where both the producers and the recipients of the advertising message interact" (Frunză 2017, 29).

With this in mind, the present study aims to undertake a qualitative analysis of several advertisements aired over the past year on Romanian commercial television, with the purpose of highlighting advertising's response to a pressing societal issue: the crisis of virility.

2. Advertising. Theoretical considerations

Before proceeding with an analysis of advertisements, it may be necessary to clarify several theoretical aspects that have proven useful to our inquiry. First and foremost, we must consider the idea put forth by Mario Vargas Llosa, according to whom the experiences of the modern individual belong to a mass culture, in other words, to a degraded and alienated form of culture. The central element of this mass culture is entertainment, and advertising "becomes a dominant vector of our cultural life. It decisively sets the tone in matters of taste, sensibility, and habits" (Llosa 2018, 22). Advertising not only permeates our cultural life, as Llosa suggests, but also becomes the link between our private, everyday, often mundane existence, lived modestly and in anonymity, and the grandeur of the present, with its exhausting calls for action, dynamism, and engagement.

In this context, we can refer to Sara Ahmed's terminology and speak of the "stickiness" of advertising, which establishes a form of relational "adhesion" with the contemporary subject, wherein the mundane becomes entangled with advertising. The "sticky" nature of advertising absorbs the entire history of the attached element—namely, the subject— "through a transfer of affect" (Ahmed 2024, 105–106).

Another fundamental trait of advertising is its idyllic character, marked by balance, the solidity of a harmonious life, and a general serenity that levels out individual differences (Nemoianu 1996, 63–69). We focus here on the idyllic, without extending the analysis to the utopian, which entails "a transformative mobility" (ibid., 63), implying a replacement of reality with the ideal, rather than an adaptation of reality to the ideal (Wunenburger 2023, 82). The ideal Wunenburger refers to is within the reach of the anonymous individual, comfortably seated on a couch, "a consumer who engages with the real world not through commitment but through curiosity" (Baudrillard 2005, 41). If reality is disturbing or even anxiety-inducing, advertising, through its hedonistic dimension, seeks to soften it and to pursue, behind every commercial, the promise of happiness (ibid., 61).

Therefore, advertising reconstructs the everyday, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary (Frunză 2023, 65). This reconstruction places consumption at its core, defined by "the substitution of spontaneous relationships, with the self and with others, with a system mediated by signs that generate models, which in turn become objects of consumption" (Baudrillard 2005, 121). From this perspective, natural qualities that differentiate and constitute the contradictory and distinctive content of each individual are reduced to identifiable patterns that can be commodified, the ultimate goal being consumption (ibid., 117).

No matter how much advertising would plan a sweetened report in relation to reality, it does not remain indifferent to the successive crises of society, and it seeks to exploit these crises economically, by using stereotypes.

Mădălina Moraru emphasizes that advertising is a domain that involves the product, with all that its presentation entails, and the consumer, whose relation to the product is shaped by various criteria. The social dimension of advertising is largely defined by its ability to reflect the needs, aspirations, and desires of the consumer. The spectacle that advertising creates has a clearly persuasive purpose, and stereotypes - easily recognizable mental schemata - structure advertisements in such a way that they allow the consumer to engage with the spectacle, to feel familiar with the proposed scenario, and, one might say, to find a place within it (Moraru 2009, 12).

For Amossy and Herschberg Pierrot (2021, 47), the stereotype expresses a social imaginary and plays a central role in contemporary society, being the result

of a process of social learning. The two scholars argue that advertising, through its repetitive messaging, can shape perceptions of the Other, particularly because this form of communication frequently promotes devaluing stereotypes, such as that of the woman as a mere aesthetic object, or conversely, the image of the mother concerned exclusively with the domestic sphere.

In the Romanian society, long dominated by a patriarchal worldview that has been perpetuated in both literature and cinema, an image of authoritative and self-assured masculinity has been preserved, typically positioned in opposition to the fragile and vulnerable femininity. Contemporary advertising continues to exploit gender stereotypes, often built upon the binary opposition between masculine and feminine. However, the elasticity and malleability specific to the commercial advertising universe becomes immediately evident upon closer examination of commercials aired over a two-year period on various Romanian commercial television channels.

3. Virility subverted: some case studies

A first observation emerging from the viewing of these advertisements is that we are far removed from the emblematic image of the lone Marlboro rider, symbol of the stoic, rugged man (Badinter 1992, 239), an unmoved, self-sufficient, and emotionally restrained instance of virility. This man avoids displaying vulnerability, even though he may possess emotions; sharing them would prove him weak. In contrast, the commercials under review reveal the use of the *anti-stereotype* (Moraru 2009) or what Lipovetsky (2000) calls the *weak stereotype*.

In the current paper I have focused on five commercials, which run on various television channels, but which can also be found online. For the analysis, I have made print screens from these advertisements, which I will refer to as “image 1, 2...” and will also provide the moment from the video they were taken at.

The first advertisement we analyse is from Altex, a well-known Romanian electro-IT retailer. In today's advertising universe, the brand plays an important role, not only in terms of product identification and differentiation in a saturated market, but also in terms of the emotional role it has with the buying public. According to Cristina Balaban's opinion, a brand significantly influences consumer behaviour: “The brand is a mix of symbolized tangible and intangible attributes, symbolized. The brand creates and can influence behaviours” (Balaban 2021, 53). The Altex advertisement in question showcases a young, physically robust man rushing out of his apartment to pick up a delivery from the local pretzel shop. He is wearing a pink bathrobe and matching pink socks (see Figure 1). The advertisement

fleetingly reveals the apartment's interior, where a woman, presumably his partner, is calmly sipping coffee, flipping through a magazine; she is dressed in a white bathrobe, and is seemingly indifferent to the man's flurry of activity.



Figure 1. *Altex* commercial, second 13

A striking gender role reversal emerges here through the stark contrast between his pink and her white bathrobe. The ad projects a future reality where products might be collected from a neighbourhood bakery, yet the narrative focus shifts from the product or brand to the man himself. As Jean-Michel Adam and Marc Bonhomme assert, "One of advertising's major manipulations is the identification with the object" (2005, 28). In this case, however, the object or brand fades into the background, and the viewer's attention is drawn instead to the atypical male figure. His image invites the audience to identify with the subversion of traditional domestic male stereotypes - this is an ordinary Romanian man, living in an apartment block, yet participating in a transformation of normative behaviours in the private sphere.

A similar situation arises in a commercial for promotional discounts at eMAG, a leading Romanian online marketplace. In the middle of a street, under the bemused gaze of a young boy, old enough to register the oddity, a middle-aged man, clad in a bright pink, oversized costume, struggles to enter a car clearly too small for him (see Figure 2). Facing the child, the man offers an explanation: "It's these offers from eMAG. It's crazy!". Through this explanation, the boy comes to understand that the man's appearance is not related to circus performance, where, under tacitly accepted cultural codes, the clown neutralizes seriousness through comedy. Instead, what we see is a dilution of masculine authority, so much so that

the figure, who might otherwise inspire admiration in a child, verges on the ridiculous.



Figure 2. *eMag* commercial, second 5

On the locutionary level, the complexity of advertising communication stems from the fact that it is “both text and image” (Adam and Bonhomme 2005, 47). The two researchers emphasize the importance of the visual component, which “fully participates in the strategic objective of advertising by staging the product in an attractive manner and by exerting a conscious or unconscious impact on its audience” (ibid., 277). In both of the above cases, we observe that the persuasive goal of the advertisement, namely, brand promotion, appears to be undermined. The impact on viewers risks becoming counterproductive precisely due to the degradation or parody of masculinity.

A final point must be made: the commercials under discussion are disseminated through television, a medium whose messages are received in a sequential and fragmented manner by viewers. This characteristic, “a structural shift in hierarchy, models, and habits” (Baudrillard 2005, 156), also influences how advertising messages are received and interpreted. Television’s capacity to reorder norms and expectations contributes to the ambivalence of advertising discourse, allowing it to simultaneously perpetuate and challenge dominant cultural stereotypes.

The next advertisement under analysis promotes a financial product, once again invoking the colour pink. The challenge is announced explicitly from the outset, as the advertisement sets out to subvert conventions: everything unfolds within the “pink mind” of a young, carefree man, an image emblematic of the

corporate employee. Dressed in a pink suit, with pink shoes, seated in a pink armchair, he nonchalantly confesses to having purchased five more suits, all pink, naturally, and adds that his wife earns ten times more than he does (see Figure 3). He is promoting a shopping card, pink, of course.



Figure 3. *Salt Bank* commercial, second 15

It becomes immediately apparent that the advertisement's economic purpose, to persuade, to create desire for the product, is diverted by the emphasis placed on other elements. One such element is the use of pink clothing, a motif shared across all three advertisements, functioning as a bearer of chromatic anti-stereotype. Another emphasized element is the reference to the wife's significantly higher income compared to the husband's. Although the primary objective remains commercial, the ad simultaneously attempts to undermine the rigidity of gender roles within the couple. However, due to its overtly anti-virile discourse, it ends up reinforcing what Baudrillard (2005) terms a valorisation through adherence to a model, or in this case, to an anti-model. The strategy employed highlights the same competitive masculine values: the ability to choose, which replaces the virtue of former times and defines the individual.

A different perspective, that of the fallen warrior rendered ridiculous, is encountered in an advertisement for a brand of beer. This advertisement explicitly illustrates the crisis of familial roles. A married man, in a bar, recounts to his male friends the tale of a parking incident. The scene evokes narratives of battle told by warriors: the drinking group appears enclosed in a conspiratorial male universe, in which the betrayal of masculine condition and logic does not exist, despite the

sceptical, even slightly contemptuous, attitude of the family, composed entirely of women. The protagonist boasts that he managed to “wedge himself between two trucks”, that is, to park between them (see Figure 4). The verb “to wedge oneself” connotes a medieval warrior gesture. Yet, the parking endeavour is actually a failure, from which the hero, more precisely, the anti-hero, emerges with difficulty, dirty and dishevelled, but with his “masculine logic” intact.



Figure 4. *Neumarkt* beer commercial, second 8

His friends inquire whether this grand feat garnered any admiration from the women. Disappointed, they learn that the only remark was a practical one about his soiled clothes. The recognition instead comes from the other men and, metonymically, from the beer poured into their glasses. Several aspects are worth underlining here: on the one hand, the masculine ideal remains beholden to the patriarchal representation of man as competitive, dominant, and always ready to demonstrate and reassert his masculinity, even when the situation clearly borders on the absurd. This reinforces Badinter’s view that, despite the modern world’s criticism of the tough-man ideal as a negative myth, it still holds a powerful grip on the male unconscious (1992, 206). On the other hand, an urgent issue of contemporary society, namely, the reconsideration of roles within the couple, is redirected toward the product being sold: in this case, beer. We return again to Baudrillard’s assertion: “diversion is the principle of consumption” (Baudrillard, 2005, 161). Thus, crises are manipulated through consumption; persuasion prevails, and the image of failed masculinity, understood and appreciated solely by the beer, aligns with the “exclusively positive dimension of advertising strategy”

(Baudrillard 2005, 161), which highlights that only beer, shared with friends, possesses so many qualities, even feminine qualities, that it becomes a substitute for emotional appreciation.

The next advertisement considered promotes nasal decongestant drops. Reclining in his wife's arms with a dramatic, forlorn gaze, a father laments that he cannot breathe (see Figure 5). As though on his deathbed, the man reflects with regret on what he should have done in life: he should have travelled more, watered the flowers, washed the dishes, spent more time with his child – who, puzzled, appears before his parents and asks the mother: “What’s wrong with dad?” Embarrassed, the mother replies that dad has a stuffy nose – just like her – but that he is exaggerating.



Figure 5. *Bixtonim* nasal drops commercial, second 5

From our analytical perspective, this advertisement is a failure. Let us explain why. Firstly, the man is depicted within a traditional family framework: the woman, as mother and caring wife, cradles her husband who is suffering from nasal congestion. Yet his posture and behaviour mimic that of a fallen warrior, seemingly at death’s door. Then, in the male discourse, structured as a final, remorseful confession, the use of the past conditional mood (“should have”) amalgamates trivial regrets (watering flowers, washing dishes) with a serious concern: the father's lack of presence in the child’s life.

Unlike the previous advertisement, in which beer symbolically assumes the role of femininity in the couple and proposes a cohesive masculine universe, here the father’s attitude is undermined by the mother’s line. While intended to reassure the child, it also delivers an implicit yet irrevocable indictment of the partner: “He has a stuffy nose just like mommy, but he exaggerates”. The couple’s

crisis is thus fully revealed. The product being advertised is relegated to the background, even though a subsequent image presents the father with the child, in visibly improved condition after using the nasal drops. From our perspective, the first part of the advertisement is far stronger, precisely because it is not parodic. Through the mother's reaction and demeanour, the commercial fails to achieve its intended goal of positively showcasing the product. Instead, it merely underscores the crisis of the traditional couple.

4. Conclusions

Starting from the observation that these pages represent an initial phase of a broader research project concerning the portrayal of the family in Romanian televised advertising, we propose a preliminary conclusion regarding the representation of men, as identified through the qualitative analysis of the commercials discussed.

Although the advertisements reflect the society's tendency to reconsider traditional family roles and to undermine, through irony and parody, the stereotype of the dominant, warrior-like male figure, the diminishing of this victorious virility does not necessarily equate to a radical transformation of the woman's role. In the commercials analysed, the female figure remains largely framed within conventional representations. At most, she adopts a passive stance when her partner makes an absurd effort to assert his masculinity or supports him emotionally, holding in her arms the husband who has succumbed to the seemingly fatal affliction of a stuffy nose.

Even in the overtly anti-stereotypical advertisement, where the man openly acknowledges his partner's financial superiority and ostentatiously embraces the colour pink to shock and challenge social biases, the perspective does not fundamentally shift. The woman remains absent; only her salary is referenced as a marker of her social emancipation. Yet the entire narrative remains centred on him, his choices, his provocative gestures, and his continued adherence to a framework of competitiveness and differentiation, which still constitute core features of masculine identity.

Thus, advertising discourse, directly related to the emotional dimension of the consumer, reacts to the upheavals of the society. The advertisements analysed reflect women's economic emancipation, their gain of autonomy, but, quoting Lipovetsky, "the exit from the matrix of domestic responsibility does not occur" (2000, 193). It is noted that a derision of "macho" values is present, but the aim pursued by the advertisement is primarily a commercial one, so that the

advertisement enters a race of synchronization with the tendency of society to rethink virility, but it does not carry it to the end.

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