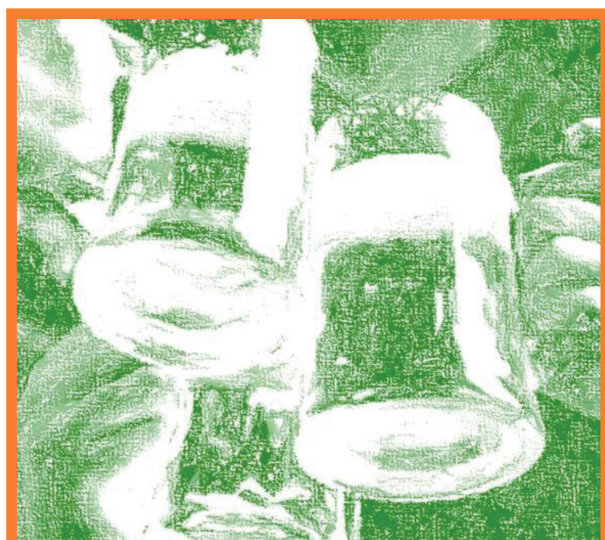


Alcohol advertising and hegemonic masculinities in Ghana: a Public Relations perspective *La publicidad del alcohol y las masculinidades hegemónicas en Ghana: una perspectiva de las Relaciones Públicas*

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Abstract

Henry Kojo Bonsu-Owu's doctoral thesis, which analyses 182 beer and bitters advertisements in Ghana, combines Taylor's messaging strategies with Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. He examines how advertising links characteristic elements of friendship, dominance and sexuality with the implication of different types of beverages, which reinforce masculine stereotypes. It invites us to reflect deeply on visual messages and their impact on male identity. From a Public Relations perspective, it highlights the non-Western approach and its ethical call to rethink the role of graphic communication.

Keyword

Advertising; alcohol; masculinity; public relations; Ghana

Resumen

La tesis doctoral de Henry Kojo Bonsu-Owu analiza 182 anuncios de cerveza y bitters en Ghana, combinando las estrategias de mensajes de Taylor con la teoría de la masculinidad hegemónica de Connell. Examina cómo la publicidad asocia elementos característicos con la amistad, la dominación y la sexualidad, en función de los distintos tipos de bebidas, reforzando así estereotipos masculinos. Nos invita a una reflexión profunda sobre los mensajes visuales y su impacto en la identidad masculina. Desde la perspectiva de las Relaciones Públicas, destaca el enfoque no occidental y su llamado ético a replantear el papel de la comunicación gráfica.

Palabras clave

Publicidad; alcohol; relaciones públicas; Ghana

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of Public Relations and graphic communication, alcoholic beverage advertising has long been fertile ground for the reproduction of gender stereotypes in both mono- and multicultural settings (Atkinson et al., 2012). In this regard, Kojo's thesis provides an opportunity to reflect on how these discursive elements are shaped within specific cultural contexts, and how visual and narrative strategies help to consolidate models of masculinity that, far from being harmless, have deep implications that affect coexistence, development, and social behaviour.

Through this kind of advertising, emotional and cognitive strain is generated within a given society, such as Ghanaian society. This situation brings into question the role, influence, and significance of advertising. Hence, from a Public Relations perspective, every communicative act is understood to have a positive or negative impact on the social perceptions of audiences and stakeholders, and therefore on the construction of shared meanings and collective imaginaries (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). These may — or may not — carry consequences that drive social change (Holtzhausen, 2005), especially in diverse contexts where gender disparities remain pervasive (Dilli et al., 2019).

Several studies have shown that messages disseminated through media and social networks (such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) not only shape but also reconfigure social norms by generating shared knowledge among individuals (Koehler, 2025; Sebastião & Trindade, 2025; Arias, 2019). Likewise, social communication involves complex dynamics of interaction and cognition that directly influence how people interpret their social environment. In this sense, media coverage combined with public narratives has the power to shape collective perception on specific issues, directly affecting public opinion, symbolic frameworks, and the perspectives of stakeholders (Mutz & Soss, 1997).

This analytical approach is particularly timely given the ongoing concern over gender gaps in various contexts. Kojo Bonsu-Owu's thesis highlights how alcohol advertising in Ghana reinforces stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity through discursive and visual strategies. His research allows us to delve deeper into these dynamics and, from the standpoint of Public Relations and graphic communication, to analyse their broader impact.

DEVELOPMENT

The thesis and its relevance

The thesis is part of the PhD programme in Strategic Communication, Advertising and Public Relations of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. The main objective is to analyse the relationship between hegemonic masculinity traits, advertising message strategies and the type of alcoholic beverage advertised. To develop the project, it analyses 182 beer and bitters advertisements produced in Ghana, applying two theoretical frameworks: Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel.

From our perspective, the value of this doctoral thesis lies in its ability to articulate theory and practice in an underexplored context. Beyond this, the research not only offers empirical evidence on the prevalence of certain masculine stereotypes in advertising but also shares a conceptual framework applicable to other contextual similarities from a cultural and productive perspective. This allows it to be interpreted from the principles of strategic communication, which seeks to create symbolic and reputational value by relying on coherent and culturally sensitive messages as proposed by (Grunig & Hunt, 2007).

A robust methodology. The methodology combines a quantitative and qualitative approach, with a powerful content analysis, providing a systematic reading of the selected advertisements. The sample (182 advertisements) was coded through a matrix based on Connell's hegemonic masculinity rankings and Taylor's message strategies. This gives it a rigour that allows correlations to be established between the discursive and visual elements of each of the advertisements. Furthermore, the use of software-assisted qualitative analysis tools gives greater validity to the findings, ensuring a triangulation with theory, data and context.

Applicability to other contexts. The findings of the thesis can also be applied to other multicultural contexts where alcohol advertising also reproduces gender stereotypes (Grau & Zotos, 2018). For

example, although there are no empirical studies on alcoholic beverage campaigns in all Latin American countries, studies such as that of Eisend (2010), have shown that gender stereotypes in advertising tend to be more persistent in cultures with high levels of masculinity, such as the reality of many Latin American countries according to Hofstede's cultural indicators.

In correspondence with this approach, Uribe et al., (2008), shared a content analysis of Chilean magazines, in which it was found that advertising in that country reproduces gender stereotypes in different dimensions, all of which reinforces the idea that these traditional representations are present in Latin American advertising discourse, a situation that corresponds with the approach offered by Kojo in his doctoral thesis.

Hegemonic masculinity and advertising

This thesis highlights nine traits of hegemonic masculinity—an especially relevant contribution, as it sheds light on a social reality that materialises in advertising through specific features such as aggressiveness, camaraderie, domination, excessive consumption, physical appearance, responsibility, sexuality, success, and weakness. It is worth noting that the most prominent indicators are camaraderie, domination, and sexuality—the latter being particularly characteristic of this type of advertisement. These traits are interpreted as marketing strategies centred on the sexualisation of the female gender, which is often reduced to yet another element within the advertising message (Gill, 2008).

The association between these traits and the types of alcoholic beverages is especially revealing. According to the analysis presented, camaraderie is associated with beer, while sexuality is linked to bitters—drinks that, in the Ghanaian context, are often promoted as aphrodisiacs. This presents a challenge for Public Relations, as it illustrates the extent to which brands are involved in the conceptualisation and imposition of stereotypes that play a key role in shaping definitions of masculinity—definitions that ultimately become generalised and normalised within a socially and culturally determined framework. As Aggarwal (2004) points out, the brand–consumer relationship is governed by social norms similar to those that shape human relationships, which underscores the need to reflect on the ethical responsibility involved in managing the messages created to position a product.

Messages and beverages

The thesis shares that advertisements referring to beer, concentrate on the implementation of mostly emotional strategies (ritual view), however, bitters, establish a combination of emotional and rational strategies (transition view). Clearly, there is a differentiation, because the advertisers, according to the product, end up adapting the message, which goes beyond the product, because it also concentrates on the social imaginaries that surround it.

In this sense, from a strategic communication perspective, the issue concentrates on a symbolic segmentation, which is grouped in the reinforcement of social and gender hierarchies. This suggests that it should be reviewed from a critical perspective of social responsibility (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

Ethical and social implications

One of the most striking aspects of this thesis is its ability to problematise the role of advertising in the reproduction of gender norms—an essential issue within the discipline, given the impact and objectification of women in countless advertisements. Moreover, it explicitly highlights the representation of men as centres of attention and dominance, portrayed as successful and sexually powerful. This portrayal is far from neutral, as it reinforces models that may lead to discriminatory or even violent behaviours.

The work done by Kojo Bonsu-Owu is a call for attention to the advertising industry, but essentially to the regulatory bodies that should attend to these actions that have a high impact on social thinking. From this perspective, it is important to refer to Kotler & Zaltman (1971), who, from a social marketing perspective, argue that campaigns should be oriented towards positive social change, not just commercial persuasion.

However, from the perspective of Public Relations, the thesis also calls for the role of communication professionals in the organisation and development of responsible messages. Because the strategic management of communication cannot and should not be separated from its social impact, in the understanding that all communicative action influences public perception and the configuration of collective imaginaries. As described by Stortini (2019), ethics in Public Relations not only implies transparency and truthfulness, but also an active responsibility for social transformation through the discursive axis.

The role of the receiver - media literacy?

Media literacy offers an important scenario for strengthening the perspective of the public, because it allows them to interpret advertising messages from a critical point of view. This competence in the framework of Public Relations, as indicated by Makama et al., (2025), reinforces the subject's capacity to resist narratives that reinforce gender stereotypes, giving rise to a more proactive, critical and aware citizenry.

CONCLUSION

This doctoral thesis has an elemental value given its valuable contribution to the study of graphic communication and advertising from a critical point of view, which is situated in a specific environment, but which can be understood from other multicultural social contexts, due to its capacity to approach the subject in an effective and versatile way.

The methodological approach is clearly rigorous and solid, because it has an important theoretical articulation, which, in addition, has a sensitivity to the social implications of advertising discourse and language that makes it a reference work for those researching the relationship between communication, gender and culture.

All of which opens up the possibility of enriching the academic and scientific debate, which, in addition, offers key tools for a more ethical and conscious advertising practice, in line with the principles of strategic communication and contemporary Relationships (Wilcox et al., 2015).

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