Gendered Representations of Parenthood in Pharmaceutical Advertising on the Web

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Mothers are the prime target market in the health-care industry. Even nowadays, they are held responsible for the purchase of pharmaceutical and hygienic products, as well as for searching for in-home care and mental-health services. Because every birth increases the potential for the consumption of health products, the industry sees mothers as an economic-growth driver. The consumer culture in which Generation Y women have grown up, coupled with the high purchasing power of the highest-educated ones, have made them a key audience for advertising, and, moreover, an important transmission channel in the current media landscape. They form a segment of the so-called “influential women’s market”. Their intensive use of social media and their need to show off their consumption practices render them as a particularly interesting target for collaborative marketing through the Web.

According to a study by the agency Exponential Advertising Intelligence (2014), the American “millennial mothers” subscribe to 3.4 social media on average, and 75% among them visit Facebook. In a context of this kind, one understands why the companies specializing in online marketing to mothers have increased during the last decade. For example, one can read on the welcoming page of the Canadian company Word of Mom Marketing “54% of moms talk to other moms before purchasing a product. Are they talking about your company? Let us help you join the conversation.” The services offered by such marketing organizations include hiring bloggers or “brand evangelists” to write favourable comments about the client’s product in various forums or social media.

This excessive focus on women for the advertising of health products and services is inseparable from the question of sexually differentiated practices in the care of others. Health care, along with tutoring and domestic tasks, contributes to the reproduction of the labour force, and, as such, has always rested mainly on the shoulders of women (Meillassoux, 1975; Fortunati, 1995; Federici, 2014). Moreover, the more the care is effective, the more its laborious character is rendered invisible (Smith, 1990, p. 19). In contrast to the cure, characteristic of a medical practice dominated by men, the care cannot be limited to a division of labour, and as a result, its constituent actions—such as listening, expressing emotions, or establishing a relationship of trust, are often not recognized as work (Collière, 1986, p 96; Treiber and Jones, p 2015, p. 152). Historically associated with women, both in its institutional and domestic versions, health care is generally seen as a natural disposition, embodying generosity and devotion—even a gift of the self from one who loves to dedicate oneself to others. The civic humanism feeding this representation is by no means compassionate; it condemns women always to give more than they receive and to raise suspicions about men willing to care more than to fight.

By choosing to exclusively target women for the promotion of children’s products, the pharmaceutical industry contributes to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes associated with health care. The image of a woman administering a drug to a child is a disconcerting banality. Under the
pretext that nearly a third of millennial mothers are single parents and have trouble identifying with the nuclear family, the market industry recommends the production of commercials emphasizing, on the one hand, the relationship between the mother and child and, on the other hand, the construction of a personal identity for women (Weber Shandwick, 2015). If these recommendations have the advantage of encouraging the production of open messages regarding possible inclusion of the mother-child in an atypical family structure, they are not pushing against the existing heteronormative framework and they do not allow the transmission of a fair representation of the household division of labour. Therefore, although the use of social media for advertising purposes can provide an opportunity for the millennial woman to express what she is, the public construction of her identity as a mother can only take place in a setting where she appears as the only one responsible for the care lavished on her child. This is at odd with another marketers’ claim that the millennial mothers have difficulty recognizing themselves in the usual clichés and they are tired of images of incompetent fathers (Weber Shandwick, 2015; Krashinsky, 2014).

Ever since the Internet has provided women with an opportunity to express themselves on maternal experience, one has witnessed an explosion of the so-called “mommy sphere”. Mom-blogs characteristically convey images of failing mothers, overwhelmed by expectations, critiques of the image of the “good mother” (Lopez, 2009). The phenomenon of humorous depictions of motherhood failures applies to a multitude of women’s writings on the Web as well as internationally on television, in books and in newspapers. Everywhere, millennial mothers loudly proclaim the right to be imperfect. Henceforth, we can ask how the health-care industry goes about seducing women online, targeted strictly according to their role as mothers, while meeting the demands expressed on the Web for more realistic and diversified representations of parenthood. One can also question the place given in the messages to the workings of a medication (or its brand), compared to the work of the parent, mother and father in the performance of care-relationships.

In an earlier study on the content of Facebook pages devoted to disease awareness, I noticed the tendency to portray mothers as heroines of preventive intervention (Niquette, 2010). A preliminary review of the content of Facebook pages designed for the promotion of children’s analgesics seems to offer a much different picture (Niquette, 2015). Issues related to “agentivity” are not the same. The goal of disease branding is to induce the person bearing responsibility for child health to recognize the signs of illness and to take the steps necessary for ensuring that medical and school authorities proceed accordingly. The aim of the direct-to-consumer drug advertising advertising for over-the-counter drugs is to convince the public of the product’s effectiveness. In this context, there is reason to believe that the challenge is one of representing the role of the caregiver in a manner that is sufficiently important so that the person feels valued, while at the same time leaving entirely the merit of the curative action of the medication. If so, this subtle devaluation of parental care in favour of the curative function of the commercial product would overlap with a devaluation of paternal care, abetting a stereotypical representation of maternal care, emptied of its laborious dimension.

**Objectives**

The overall objective of the research is to understand how the targeting of millennial mothers by the pharmaceutical industry informs the representation of roles played by people, objects, and abstract entities involved in the care relationship.
Specifically, the research aims to:

- describe what characterizes the different strategies for promoting children’s medication in social media;
- assessing the congruence between the sociological roles (updated in social practices) and the grammatical roles attributed to the subjects and beneficiaries of the action within the commercial social-media material (including the commentary of recipients);
- examine the gendered nature of the representation of care for children, in particular, the sexually differentiated distribution of the tasks of which the care relationship is constituted.

**Method**

My research falls entirely within the critical analysis paradigm, as described by Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2005, p. 193–196), specifically, in the current of critical-discourse analysis, developed by Fowler (1991), Teun Van Dijk (1993) and Norman Fairclough (1985, 1995). The method I intend to adopt is based on the latest version of the functional systemic grammar of transitivity proposed by Michael Halliday (2013). According to Halliday, transitivity confers on the clause the status of representation; it is the cornerstone of the semantic organization of experience. In concrete terms, the task of the researcher is to analyze the processes represented by verbs, the way in which participants and objects are linked to one another through these processes, and the circumstances in which the action unfolds. Who swallows what? Who is talking to whom? Who is what and under what circumstances? It involves, as it were, a grammatical study of the representative process.

The corpus will comprise the content of Facebook pages—or other social networks and on-line communities—sponsored by pharmaceutical companies, and created for parents of children with symptoms associated with a pathological condition. I will proceed to a detailed and systematic analysis of both the texts and images created by the sender, as well as the contributions and commentary of the internauts themselves.

**References**


