

Gender Conflict and Violence in the Advertising Discourse

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- *Harsh statistics on gender violence have increased people's concern about this form of aggression. From the sociological perspective, gender violence is interpreted as a type of social interaction in which men and women are unequally situated due to biological, socio-economic and cultural factors. The mass media, particularly television, is considered to be an environmental factor in, on the one hand, the configuration of gender stereotypes and, on the other hand, the conviction that conflict is becoming a sufficient reason to deploy human violence. Advertising, one of the three big television discourses, also imitates the narrative models of other audiovisual content. On one hand, there is the prevalence of the model of the dominant, competitive and even aggressive masculine subject and on the other there is a new model of the aggressive young woman who attacks anybody who might try to limit her.*

Stressing the Term 'Gender Violence'

Society's concern about violence dates to the beginning of human civilisation. There have always been people who, shaken by the astonishing facility with which intra-species violence is produced, have asked why. At the same time, the development in recent decades of science, on the one hand, and democratic societies, on the other, have promoted, free of religious links or ties of any other kind, the search for responses to these type of acts that are so

incomprehensibly human. This concern has multiplied lately because of the cases in which violence takes place in the home and where women are the victims. Although this form of masculine domination is not new, a good part of today's society views with horror acts that were previously hidden or even tolerated. In fact, violence against women is so well rooted in our culture that the Spanish dictionary *Diccionario de la lengua española* (21st edition) defines violence (in the fourth given meaning) as "the action of violating a women" (The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, 1997). In this way, from the many possible acts of a violent nature, it highlights one (rape) perpetrated against a single sex (women).

In any case, limiting the semantic field of what we understand violence to be is quite complicated, as scientific reflections on the concept arrived much later than the daily use of the expression. It has almost been used as a 'lazy expression' to cover many human acts, from the way a football player kicks the ball through to the actions of a serial killer, making it an all-embracing term that is bursting at the seams (Storr, 1987: 10). Gender violence is not alien to this disquisition, as it groups together a large number of actions that vary in intensity and in the consequences on the psychological or physical life of the victim and configures a specific type of violence in which motive, attitude, conduct, emotion and personality traits are amalgamated.

The extensive literature on the study of violence highlights its importance as a social fact. Entities and institutions of all types have been interested in researching violence and have generated a great many possible perspectives for studying it, which could be summarised into three definitions: broad, restricted and legitimist (ARÓSTEGUI, 1994: 22). The first understands violence to be a structural social fact, i.e., any form of domination in which social injustice and inequality prevails. This definition considers

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violence to include the fact that men and women are paid differently for doing the same work. The second considers that violence involves the use of physical force in an intentional manner and that observable damage is generated in the victim. This concept is more specific and has greater social acceptance. However, in identifying violence exclusively with physical force, it excludes a great many acts that sometimes generate invisible untoward consequences, particularly in the case of gender violence. In fact, it is normal for physical violence between couples to be related to a complex grid of domination and psychological humiliation that is even more damaging to victims than the aggression that involves physical force. Finally, the legitimist perspective understands that an act is violent when it runs contrary to what is legally established or culturally accepted, i.e., if it is an illegitimate act. This involves a third approach in which violence is not an objective fact in itself but rather depends on its interpretation by the parties involved.

In short, delimiting the concept of violence is a task researchers have struggled with, without their efforts having led to a unitary definition among the scientific community overall. On the contrary, the dissenters are palpable. Disagreement sometimes arises not just when researchers have different ideas about what the expression 'violence' can include, but also on a number of concepts specific to it, including power, intimidation, force, coercion, manipulation, conflict, immorality, aggression, rage, hostility, etc. In some cases, an absolute identification of violence has been found with one or some of these terms. In other cases, reflections have focused precisely on the differences that stop the terms from being compared. However, I would like to emphasise two notions that are closely related to the development of gender violence in our culture: the idea of power and the notion of conflict.

Powerful people try to maintain their dominant position over others through the use of force, not just in the case of political totalitarianism but also in the more particular case of domestic violence, very often the result of a cosmovision in which husbands have power over their wives and both partners over their progeny. This is where a subject's self-perception with respect to his place in the world and the power he holds over the things that surround him enters the picture. In the majority of cases, human aggression is activated to control the impression others may have of you.

When a subject feels that his dominant position is threatened (e.g., when women begin separation or divorce proceedings), he is nearly always stirred to counter attack, to demonstrate his strength and ability to fight the people hurting him. The origin of many acts of gender violence thus lie in men's efforts to hold onto their power and influence over the behaviour of others. They thus end up hurting or killing the people closest to them, i.e., their partners, children or parents, and even hurting themselves through suicide, an act that has become a sad epilogue to many episodes of gender violence.

On the other hand, it is common to understand violence - and also gender violence - as a social interaction in which the actors involved are at conflict. Although conflict is a necessary condition for violence between a couple, it is not a sufficient condition for explaining it. It is common for conflict between couples and gender violence to take place simultaneously, but they can also happen separately. At the same time, it is common for violence to be activated as a good tactic for resolving conflict, in which the aggressor recovers control of the situation by violating the integrity of the victim, who is thus controlled. Conflict between humans is thus present in the origin of any violent situation. Violence does not tend to take place outside of conflict, although this does not mean that all conflicts between couples will be resolved through the use of violence.

Two types of aggression are distinguished in gender violence. The first is instrumental violence and the second is emotional violence (BERKOWITZ, 1996: 40). In the first case, violence becomes an instrument for demonstrating domination over another person. Precipitation is not common in instrumental violence, as the attacks are executed coolly and with a clear will. The aggressor attacks when he has the best chance of success and conscientiously assumes the risks in order to minimise them. In the second case, the principle objective is to hurt the victim. Emotional violence arises from a feeling of personal dissatisfaction and the aggressor seeks pleasure by hurting others. Unlike the former case, the attacks are undertaken without or with very little premeditation and without a conscious analysis of their results for either the aggressor or the victim. The violence is produced in a type of short-circuit in the normal process of evaluating a situation on the part of the aggressor, who doesn't stop to think what the consequences of his actions

might be. This is a type of gender violence in the heat of the moment, where conflict leads directly to aggression. In these cases, the conflict is usually much more intense and longer lasting. The aggressive exchange (words, gestures, etc.) leads to violence at a moment of lack of control and explodes. Moreover, the roles of aggressor and victim can sometimes alternate within the same act, as both are acting in response to a very strong internal emotion.

What is the Role of the Media and Advertising?

The study of the causes of human violence has led to three major explanations (EIBL-EIBESFELDT, 1987: 89-90), of which the *Model of the Psychology of Learners* (particularly Bandura) appears to be the most respected. This model broadly considers that any violent act stems from prior learning. From the time they are little, children see that violence is a way to achieve social success. Success in the use of violent behaviour reinforces violence itself and makes it a habit with good results in social life: "Biology makes us aggressive, but it is culture that makes us pacific or violent" (SANMARTÍN, 2000: 19). From this perspective, the social models and stereotypes shown on TV, in the movies, music or advertising, could lead to the learning of attitudes and behaviours in which conflict resolution necessarily leads to violence. Obviously, the media is just one part, albeit an important part, of this environment in which humans move and which is the cause of most human predisposition towards aggression that results from a lack of family attention, impoverished economic and cultural environments, peer pressure, sexual and/or psychological abuse, etc. All together it makes up a network of causes that allow aggression to surface early on in many people's lives.

The media has reproduced a number of values associated with masculine aggression (competition, virility, honour, power, struggle, etc.), which has allowed the glorification of the male sex in detriment of the female one. Western culture has given importance to men, from whom it demands an ongoing reissuing of his virility that can sometimes lead to gender violence. This indomitable masculine behaviour is sometimes accompanied by exhibition in front of others. As occurs with other higher animals, a man commonly competes with others to demonstrate his virility, strength

and power, sometimes simply to show off and other times as part of a real competition that can end in the death of his adversaries.

However, it is also true that the presence of women is slowly gaining ground in all types of criminal acts, including violence-related ones. In their attempt to make inroads in areas that were previously and discriminately the competence of men, women are probably taking on some of the values that make people predisposed towards violence, i.e., power, domination, competitiveness, etc. In some way, women's activities, tastes and values have become *masculinised*. This would explain why aggression is taking increasing hold in the behaviour of some women.

As I have already said, the mass media, and particularly television, is considered to be a determining factor in the propagation of gender stereotypes that can threaten the development of a truly equal society. It goes without saying that there are other voices that defend the social utility of this new form of human communication. These opposing ideological positions generate fierce debates which increase the urgency of obtaining responses that refer to the effects that the media can provoke in the psyche and behaviour of receivers. Science today generally recognises the media's importance in propagating ideas and processes for carrying out violent actions but not as direct inducers of these actions. The media does not determine violent acts itself but it provides people with lots of knowledge about how to hurt another person.

None of the content on television and in the other mass media is exempt from this responsibility. Miquel Rodrigo Alsina (1998: 23) considers that violence is present in the three genres of the audiovisual discourse, i.e., advertising, news and entertainment. Although the areas traditionally criticised for their violent nature are films and TV series, he also emphasises the presence of violence in ads and news reports. To demonstrate this, he presents one figure: 10% of the toy advertisements analysed by the Catalonia Broadcasting Council featured an element of violence. The presence of violent content, which used to be almost exclusively apportioned to films and fictional series, has thus also moved into the commercial and news discourses. I would thus like to look at the following scientific suppositions (BERKOWITZ, 1998: 46):

- Violence on TV appears to contribute to the appearance

and development of antisocial effects on the public.

- There are three principle types of effects provoked by television violence: the learning of aggressive attitudes and conducts, insensitivity towards violence and the fear of being a victim of violence.

- The way that violence is represented is essential to determining its ability to generate effects on viewers, as not all displays of violence on TV have the same risk of hurting the public.

As such, not all the violence represented on TV, including advertising, has the ability to affect the human mind, but the most dangerous situation would be one in which (DONNERSTEIN 1998: 54-55):

- The aggressor is attractive and acts for *morally appropriate* reasons.
- The aggressor is immersed in continuous violent actions that appear to be realistic.
- The aggressor is rewarded for his actions.
- The aggressor uses conventional weapons.
- The aggressor executes his actions without visible consequences.
- The action is endowed with a certain sense of humour.

Aggressive Men and Women in Television Advertising

Advertising has been overlooked in recent decades in studies that have measured the presence of violent content on TV. To begin with, most researchers tend to exclude news bulletins, sports broadcasts and advertising spaces from their analyses. However, if, with many precautions, one can understand the exclusion of the first two because they are based on images that have not been previously conceived through a worked-upon script, it does not make sense to exclude advertising content as it not only has a proven effectiveness but is the result of extremely careful planning.

As I said before, one of the (few) pioneering studies into violence and advertising was the one the Catalonia Broadcasting Council commissioned a few years ago, aimed at objectively measuring the presence of violent content in television toy advertisements (RODRIGO ALSINA, 1998: 27).

The study found that 10% of toy adverts included scenes of an aggressive nature. This figure is important if we bear in mind that it involves a sector of advertisements that are closely regulated by law and monitored by consumer and user associations.

In any case, it is very hard to find researchers who have reflected on violence in advertising. Pioneers in the field within Spain include Perales and García Nebreda (1998: 50), who noted a number of years ago the trend towards violent TV content in traditionally non-violent discourses, such as advertising. These researchers felt that advertising had been infected with the violence present in other television content. They concluded that advertising not only distracted audiences but could also present aggression as a socially inevitable model of behaviour and representative of social success.

Imbert's similar conclusions from over a decade ago are even more enlightening (*Los escenarios de la violencia*, 1992). He related the growth in violent actions in advertising with the redistribution of gender roles in society. He said that in violent ads, aggression was vindicated as a positive social value and allowed women to access the social recognition that society had denied them for years. Advertising is thus assuming the reigning ideological disorder in the context in which aggression - a traditionally masculine value - is transferred to the sphere of today's woman: "The [myth] of the female rebel has been developed lately, (...) not so much a rebel in the economic sense but rather in what we could call the imaginary sense, i.e., the right to fantasise, to enjoy aesthetic values and even the right to a certain type of gratuitousness (enjoying a status and at the same time the refusal of this status)" (1992: 40). In short, aggression, which in traditional advertising was the *natural* terrain of man, has become a positive value for the new image of women in advertising. Since Imbert first drew these impressions, there have been many examples of ads in which women use aggression as a very useful resource to obtain all sorts of social and economic objectives. In general, the dialectic between the genders is found in the narrative basis of this type of message.

In current TV advertisements, women still appear in the classical stereotypes of the mother-woman, the Aphrodite-woman, the submissive woman or the angel-women, to use the classifications posited by León (2001: 83-108), but along

with these classical stereotypes, it also presents new women who are more independent, self-made, dynamic and tough. The new woman, who does not claim her femininity or sensuality as a principal feature but rather the values I mentioned before, manages her sentimental relations with a strong feeling of domination and is not disposed to let any opportunity slip by to remind her partner that she has the same rights and obligations as him. In this way, given the slightest insinuation of sexual harassment or male-chauvinistic behaviour, the new woman attacks (something without piety) her partner who, in most cases, has no choice but to defend himself, as counter-attack is very rarely given as an option. In some way, today's advertisements employ a policy of positive discrimination in which women are now permitted particular aggressive actions against men which would not be tolerated the other way around.

In one research work I did specifically into the types of representation of violence in advertising (GARRIDO 2003), I was able to confirm the above-mentioned trends noted by other researchers. The study involved analysing more than 1,200 ads broadcast by Canal Sur in recent years, in which I discovered that the presence of explicit violence only affected 4.79% of the total advertisements screened. Although this figure is not inconsiderable, it was much lower than the amount of violence in other TV content, such as films, made-for-TV movies, series and cartoons.

As you can see, more than half the TV ads with violent content pursued an exclusively male public. This figure rose to nearly 90% when the target was both men and women, while women were the exclusive targets of 12% of these types of ads. These figures lead us to conclude that the audience sought by ads with violent content was markedly male, but that aggression was also an argument of growing persuasion for a female public, who in today's advertising world are attributed some of the characteristics that decades ago were reserved almost exclusively for men.

In general, most violent ads continue to be targeted at men. In these ads, the male protagonist with which the viewer can associate effectively employs violence in situations of competition with other men. In fact, competitiveness and aggression were associated in many of the ads analysed, to the point that it was normal for male violence to be associated with the world of sport, thus putting paid to the idea of a clean, non-violent game. For

Table 1. Gender of the Target Public of Ad Campaigns

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number of Ads</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Exclusively male	31	55,36
Exclusively female	7	12,50
Male and female	18	32,14
Total	56	100,00

Source: author's own work

example, in a Nike ad for its Cross Training line, the young male protagonist (Leo) moves through a series of videogames in which a great many violent actions associated with sports such as football, basketball, tennis or car-racing are developed. In this advertisement, there was a very significant gender conflict. At one point in the ad, Leo rushes from one scene to another by breaking (literally) through the stage, whereupon he lands on a young woman holding a couple of guns. Without meaning to, Leo falls on her chest, at which point she starts firing indiscriminately and, upon realising she can't get him off, punches him with such force that he flies into another scene in this vertiginous ad. Gender conflict is represented in a simple and stereotyped manner, resolved by the violence of positive discrimination I mentioned before, in which women defend themselves in a manner out of all proportion to the slightest male insinuation, even if the male subject, as was the case with Leo, was unable to control his actions.

To some extent, a great many ads continue to show idyllic worlds in which conflicts do not exist. However, when they show conflict between couples or simply gender conflict, the behaviour is usually violent and suggests yet again that violence is the most effective way of resolving conflict, including gender conflict. A new added feature is that women are reflected and attracted by a type of advertising that promotes female aggression, which in many ads aimed at women becomes a sign of independence and women's superiority over men. An advertisement for La Cocinera shows a girl throwing a jug at her partner's head when she discovers he has been cheating on her. Another ad, for Tampax Compak, features the female protagonist (the

incarnation of the new, independent young woman) attacking a group of men when all they want to do is offer her some items of clothing. At the end, the girl is emotionally compensated for her violent behaviour when a couple of the boys gaze at her in rapture. The ad ends with a significant closing phrase addressed at the product's young consumers, which says, "The game will go on, what are you going to do?"

Of the characters (whether aggressors or victims) featured in the advertisements with violent content that I analysed, 75.05% were men and 18.32% were women. In the remaining 7.63% of cases it was impossible to tell the sex, either because the characters were inanimate beings or animals without a gender determination. If we study these figures by profile of aggression, we find that men were mainly aggressors, but also victims (48 of 63). All up, contrary to the official statistics, women were more often represented as aggressors rather than victims of the actions. The reasons for this can surely be found in the two factors mentioned before: firstly, there is a heightened sensitivity towards violence against women, which means that a type of message in which a woman is the victim would be more reproachable and could thus damage the advertiser's image, and secondly, many of today's advertisements feature a new type of woman who embodies traditionally masculine values, including aggression.

That is why it is common to find female protagonists who are not intimidated by men. In an ad for Nestlé Crunch Cereal, two flatmates bitterly attack the physical integrity of the man in the flat in front of them, who had insinuated something through the window. The ad awards these women "the use of combat against a man, which is commercially profitable and which is one of the peculiarities of modern-day life" (LEÓN, 2001: 96). This type of apparently justified female aggression is repeated in other ads. The ad for the popular children's film *Toy Story 2* shows the cowgirl protagonist savagely attack the male star, Woody, no doubt because of some sexist comment the ad does not show. Finally, another advertisement, this time for Levi Twisted jeans, features a girl violently pushing a boy who, unable to control the movement of his jeans, can't do anything to prevent his zip getting caught up with that of the girl, something which she considers to be a clear case of sexual harassment. These apparently justified forms of

Table 2. Gender of the Characters in Violent Advertisements

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Number of Characters</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Male	97	74.05
Female	24	18.32
Not especificed	10	7.63
Total	131	100.00

Source: author's own work

aggression are in keeping, as I said earlier, with the most pernicious form of representation in the generation of the psychological effects of learning, fear and insensitivity among different publics.

Female aggression is sometimes presented as a characteristic that is not only valued by women, but also by men. I have already mentioned the male stars of the Tampax Compak ad who were attracted by their particular guerrilla, but there are other, similar cases. An ad for the Peugeot 206 shows a couple who agree to a blind date after meeting on the Internet. They say they will recognise each other because they will be holding a red rose, but the boy drops his rose when he discovers that the girl is not as attractive as he had imagined. In the following shots, this apparently boring and mediocre girl is transformed into a *superwoman* who easily and aggressively passes a great many tests with the help, of course, of the car being advertised. The boy who had dropped his rose hurriedly picks it up again, attracted by such a tough woman.

Sometimes female aggression is projected onto other women, such as in the ad for Camy's Extreme ice-cream, in which a woman stops her friend from eating the ice-cream through an extremely vivid scene of violence - particularly psychological violence - in the purest style of a gore film. Other times, although very rarely for the reasons already mentioned, a woman is the victim of the narrative at play. This is the case of the ad for Axe deodorant, in which the irresistible attraction for the man who uses the product results in a woman dying. The action is located in a violent boxing match. A boy comes in and sits next to a girl who is

better looking than him. She begins to be attracted to him (the irresistible *Axe factor*) and closes her eyes in a moment of ecstasy. Just then, one of the boxers is thrown into the air and lands on the girl, who is crushed. Before helping the victim, the male protagonist notices that the smell of his deodorant is beginning to affect the woman on his other side.

By Way of Conclusion

Advertisements mainly show male aggressors and victims. However, women are more often represented as the aggressors than the victims of a violent action. This overrepresentation of woman as aggressor could have a number of different explanations: firstly, social sensitivity towards messages in which women are victims of aggression and secondly, advertising support for a type of tough young woman who refuses to be cowed by the opposite sex.

On the other hand, independently of whether men or women are aggressors or victims in ads, the model used in the representation of advertising violence makes it possible to conclude that violence is a successful way to resolve human conflicts, including gender conflicts. In general we could say that comparing the conclusions of this work with other data uncovered by the researchers behind *Recomanacions de València*, published by the Queen Sofia Centre for the Study of Violence (1997), suggests there are particular elements that can seriously damage viewers, especially young viewers: the presence of narrativity, a character who intentionally carries out violent actions, the consummation of aggression without any other alternative, the legitimisation of aggressive acts and characters and the physical attractiveness of aggressors, the youth of aggressors and victims, the association of social recognition with aggression, the lack of punishment, the presence of material or emotional rewards and, finally, the use of humour as a way of sweetening the most serious actions.

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