5. ENDURE, JOIN THEM, OR LEAVE?

SUFFERING WOMEN IN MOBILE GAME ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Mobile free-to-play games need to reach large audiences, yet the acquisition of these players has become increasingly challenging. One of the main ways to reach new audiences is advertising. Some game companies have started to depend on provocative and misleading advertising to gain the viewer's attention and lure players to their games. Especially as these advertisements often have wide exposure, representations in them are an important and interesting target to explore. This study investigates advertisements from two games targeted at women, *Project*

Makeover and *Matchington Mansion*. The results show that, while the advertisements do show some diversity in some areas, the content is heavily stereotypical, portraying women as weak and helpless, and leaving them suffering and appealing to the watcher to help by downloading the game. This leads to questions about consumer protection and the harm these advertisements can cause.

Keywords

MOBILE GAMES, free-to-play, advertising, misleading, gender stereotypes, gender display, representation

INTRODUCTION

As mobile games have become popular and the market oversaturated, game companies are struggling to reach enough new players for the games to be sustainable. While mobile free-to- play games currently generate over half of the digital game market revenue (SuperData 2021), thousands of new mobile games are being published every day (Nieborg 2016), meaning fierce competition for a game to stand out from the mass. One of the main ways to reach new audiences is advertising.

Likely due to the challenges mobile game companies face, advertising has become more aggressive and misleading, and often includes provocative and risky content (Alha 2023). Meanwhile, advertisements are playing an increasingly important role, as they reach wide audiences, including children and teenagers, through mobile and social media (Reid Chassiakos et al. 2016). Mobile game advertising is also an interesting topic of research due to the games being mostly free to download and play, making them possibly less closely regulated compared to advertisements that market paid products. This means that free-to-play mobile game advertisements are getting away more easily with unethical or even illegal advertising practices.

This study looks into the content of mobile game advertising, taking gender representations as the target to explore. A large number of researchers have been studying gender representation in advertisements, often finding gender being portrayed in a stereotypical manner (see Grau & Zotos 2018; Navarro-Beltrá & Llaguno 2012), while studies focusing on gender representation in games have found a clear focus on male representations and sexualization of women (e.g., Kondrat 2015; Lynch et al. 2016; Mikula 2003). However, there has been less focus on gender representation in game advertising. This study investigates advertisements from two free-to-play mobile games targeted at female audiences, *Project Makeover* (Magic Tavern 2020) and *Matchington Mansion* (Magic Tavern 2017). In an attempt to show how these advertisements portray women, this study works as a discussion opener into media content that has been including increasing amounts of susceptible and possibly harmful content.

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING AND GAMES

Representation of women and gender roles in media and advertising have been studied extensively for decades (e.g., Belkaoui & Belkaoui 1976; Bretl & Cantor 1988). Women have been portrayed as caretakers of family and home, passively and without decision-making capabilities, and as sexual objects, dependent, irrational, weak, childish, and subordinate (Kang, 1997). Further discussion then considers the stakes or the consequences of these representations, and whether they merely mirror society or also mold it (Holbrook 1987; Pollay 1986, 1987). Understanding how media affects us is difficult and often even impossible. However, advertisements, including the gendered stereotypes in them, may have wide-spread effects, influencing behaviors, attitudes, values, culture, and society, sometimes unintentionally (Dixon 2019; Pollay 1986). Advertisements themselves reflect the society around them, albeit by distorting it (Pollay 1987), making the effects even more complex and difficult to measure.

According to Goffman (1979), advertisements create a "pseudo-

reality" which can be best understood by comparing the depicted male-female relations to those as a parent and a child. Through an analysis of almost 400 advertisements, he suggested that systemic gender differences find their "purest expression" in the world of advertisements and categorized gender displays of *relative size, feminine touch, function rating, family, ritualization of subordination,* and *licensed withdrawal*. Kang (1997) later amended Goffman's categories with two additional categories, *body display* and *independence/self-assertiveness*. In a more recent study, looking at *Vogue* and *Vanity* advertisements, Kohrs and Gill (2021) applied Goffman's framework and found little evidence of most categories being present in the advertisements. Only *feminine touch* was apparent, while they discovered a new trope of *confident appearing*, where women appeared confident, holding their heads high and looking directly at the viewer.

Historically, digital games and their advertisements have also typically employed men as the main and active characters, and women either as non-existent or in secondary or passive roles (Chess et al. 2017; Dill et al. 2005; Glaubke 2001). This disparity follows the lack of diversity in game development companies, with men forming the majorities and holding power positions (Bailey et al. 2019). Recently this has started to slowly change, and both game companies and their products have become slightly more diverse. While White men still hold most of the active roles in digital games, more women, people of color, and other marginalized people have gained more space (Lynch et al. 2016).

While the media environments have changed, their role in our lives has remained important and currently more ubiquitous than ever, as, due to smartphones and social media, we are constantly exposed to various media content. Even young children often have their own devices, and are therefore often exposed to advertising without the control over, or knowledge of, the content from caregivers. While traditional media can restrict the exposure of certain types of content for underaged audiences, mobile and social media can broaden the exposure to content regulated elsewhere (Reid Chassiakos et al. 2016). Even though audiences, including children, are not

merely passive receptacles of advertisements, environments filled with unwanted advertisements can be demanding and distressing for children to navigate in (Martínez 2019).

ADVERTISING MOBILE FREE-TO-PLAY GAMES

This section discusses mobile free-to-play games as a specific case for advertising and gender representation. While these games have grown to form the biggest market segment of digital games, covering almost 60% of all revenue (SuperData, 2021), individual free-to-play games struggle to become profitable. Free-to-play games are free to access and play, and generate revenue when they are able to convert their players into paying players. Typically, only a small portion of the players end up paying, which means free-to-play games need to acquire large audiences to attract enough paying players (Alha 2020). As thousands of mobile games are launched daily, acquisition of these players has become increasingly difficult and expensive (Nieborg 2016).

One of the main ways to reach new audiences is advertising. Advertisements can be shown in other mobile games and on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Targeting advertisements has also become more difficult, for instance due to Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[1] and after Apple ended default sharing of the Identifier for Advertisers (IDFA)[2] in 2021. This means that mobile game companies can no longer reach interested audiences as easily, which means a rise in marketing costs or a drop in acquisition numbers. This further puts more pressure on the performance of advertising campaigns, and can mean advertisements becoming more aggressive, provocative, and misleading in order to lure players to download the game – and hope they will stay, even if the game does not match the advertisement. These advertisements

1. See https://europa.eu/youreurope/business/dealing-with-customers/data-protection/data-protection-gdpr/index_en.htm
2. See more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identifier_for_Advertisers

can also aim to become viral, as it is more likely they will be shared on social media if the advertisement is provocative (Freeman et al. 2022). Advertising can be outsourced to third-party companies, meaning that the game and the videos advertising the game are made by different parties, widening the gap between the two.

So far, very little action has been taken when misleading or harmful advertisements have breached the policies of, for instance, Google and Apple[3], and even the law in many countries. As app and social network platforms act as intermediaries, advertising campaigns are profitable to them as well, and might thus be an incentive to allow them. While the platforms are rarely at risk (Zanathy 2021), for game companies, misleading advertisements may lead to negative ratings (Mago 2020), which in turn can negatively affect acquisition of players. Complaints about misleading or harmful advertisements could, at least in theory, lead to sanctions or bans. As free-to-play game companies are metrics-driven, a large part of the development depends on data from viewers and players. The effectiveness of advertisements can be tracked and analyzed: how many see, click, or share the ad, install the game, stay loyal, and pay. If the lifetime value of acquired players is higher than the cost for acquiring them, they are profitable. And as an increasing number of mobile games use these misleading advertisements, and many popular games have run them for years, it indicates that the benefits might outweigh the risks. In the end, regulatory bodies have a central role, as they can impose recommendations or actions against misleading or harmful advertisements. Some such decisions have been made, for instance by the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK[4] and the industry self-regulatory body, National Advertisement Division (NAD), in the US. In a recent recommendation by NAD, Magic

3. See for instance https://support.google.com/adspolicy/answer/6020955 and https://searchads.apple.com/policies

4. See an example of a ruling by ASA against harmful gender stereotypes: https://www.asa.org.uk/rulings/higgs-technology-co-ltd-a22-1156682-higgs- technology-co-ltd.html

Tavern agreed to discontinue certain advertisements for *Project Makeover* due to harmful negative gender stereotypes[5].

Advertisements for mobile free-to-play games have increasingly been adding content that attempts to provoke or appeal to audiences (Alha 2023). Online advertisements only have a brief period of time to catch the attention of viewers before they scroll to the next content on social media, or avert their gaze from an unskippable in-game advertisement, making the first seconds of the advertisement important. It is important to note that it is not necessary for viewers to like the content; rather, it is more crucial to draw their attention and cause a reaction. Possibly due to this, advertisements have begun to include increasingly over-the- top, confusing, or even offensive content that makes the viewers watch the whole advertisement – and possibly download the game. This can mean crude stereotypes, sexualized content, violence, and other risky content (Alha 2023). Therefore, it is expected that analyzing mobile game advertisements can reveal not only similar gender stereotypes seen in other media and advertising, but that these stereotypes are taken even further. While the games themselves may be relatively family-friendly, this does not apply to the advertisements. Children and young people are constantly exposed to mobile game advertisements (Martinéz 2019), which raises further questions about the content.

METHODS AND DATA

Project Makeover and *Matchington Mansion* were chosen as the target games as they are both relatively successful and have published a large number of advertisements, making more in-depth analysis and comparison possible. Additionally, the games feature women as their main characters (MC) and display provocative and misleading advertisements. Both games were developed by Magic Tavern, a US-based mobile game company, although it is possible the actual advertisement development has been outsourced to a third

5. See the decision from https://bbbprograms.org/media-center/dd/project-makeover

party. While there is no accurate and reliable public information on actual player populations, according to Udonis[6], 88 percent of *Project Makeover* players are women with an average age of 28, supporting the belief of female-dominated audiences. The advertisements are aimed at a diverse range of audiences, apparently including minors.

The sampling of the advertisements was done by utilizing YouTube playlists, and collecting many of these videos and analyzing a randomized sample of 100 advertisements, 50 advertisements from each game. Almost all of these advertisements depict a young adult woman as the MC. To focus on this, the few cases where the MC was a child (three cases encountered) or an elderly person (four encountered cases) were not included in the analysis. The excluded advertisements were replaced so that the final number of analyzed advertisements reached the target number. In no encountered cases was the main character an adult man. Advertisements in these games sometimes, but rarely, feature men as MCs.

The advertisements were animations of approximately 30 seconds in duration, and followed short, yet dramatic, scenarios in people's lives. The videos typically had no voice-overs, except utterances to convey feelings such as surprise, pleasure, or pain. Some responses by the MC were shown, providing information on what was happening on the screen, for example "My husband!" to signal that the man kissing another woman was the MC's husband. Typical scenarios of each game's advertisements are described in the next chapter.

The advertisements were analyzed based on Goffman's (1979) categories of gender-stereotypic, nonverbal displays, and complemented with Kang's (1997) and Kohrs and Gill's (2021) additional categories. The analysis included additional displays not covered by the framework, and the following categories, which are typical of the female characters in the advertisement types investigated, were added during an iterative analysis process: *romantic interest, unattrac-*

6. https://www.blog.udonis.co/mobile-marketing/mobile-games/project-makeover-monetization

appearance, oppression, tormenting, and *bad ending*. The categories are explained below:

- *Relative size:* Men are stereotypically portrayed as being taller and larger than women, conveying not just biological size but difference in status or power. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Feminine touch:* Women are stereotypically shown touching people, objects, or themselves, lightly or barely touching, in contrast to more masculine grasping or holding with purpose. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Function rating:* When men and women are collaborating to complete a task, men are depicted as being in charge and performing the executive role. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *The ritualization of subordination:* Lack of power and superiority are shown through body positioning, such as a head or body cant, lying down, or a bashful knee bend. Power and superiority are connected to masculinity, and the lack of these to femininity. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Licensed withdrawal:* Stereotypically, women are presented as emotionally removed from the scene, for instance looking away, appearing lost, inattentive, hopeless, confused, or upset. Based on Goffman (1979).
- *Body display:* Women are more likely to wear revealing clothes, or appear nude. This can include, for instance, mini-skirts, exposed cleavage, see-through clothes, lingerie, a towel, or no clothing. Based on Kang (1997).
- *Confident appearing:* More recently, women have also been depicted as being confident or defiant, with heads held high, face forward and looking into the camera, and rarely smiling. Based on Kohrs and Gill (2021).
- *Agency:* Based on Kang's (1997) category of *independence and self-assertiveness*, which evaluates a woman's overall image, in terms of independence and assertiveness. In this

analysis, this category especially focused on whether women have the ability to take action or make their own decisions.

- *Motherhood:* Modified from Goffman's (1979) *family* category. In the *family* category the nuclear family forms the basic unit, often depicting the daughter closer to mother, and the son closer to the father. In the advertisements investigated here, it proved to be more fruitful to look into *motherhood*: how women are represented with their children, or shown to be pregnant.

The analysis was open to new displays not covered by the framework, and the following categories, which are typical of the female characters in the investigated advertisement types, were added during an iterative analysis process:

- *Romantic interest:* The narrative includes the main character's romantic partner or her interest in initiating a romantic or sexual partnership with someone. This aligns with women often being associated with romance in fiction, for instance, stereotypically preferring romantic movies, rather than action movies (Wühr et al. 2017).
- *Unattractive appearance:* The main character is purposefully depicted as unattractive, with tangled hair, worn clothes, dirty skin, and other negative connotations. This differs considerably from typical advertisements featuring women, where they are often depicted as attractive, and conform to traditional beauty standards (see Cortese 2015).
- *Oppression:* A repeating narrative in the advertisements is that the main character is mistreated by the other characters in the advertisement. This can manifest in several different ways: the main character can be, for instance, betrayed, ridiculed, or excluded.

- *Tormenting:* The "player", who is supposed to help the main character (intentionally or unintentionally) to make choices that are harmful.
- *Bad ending:* Due to the combination of oppression and tormenting, the main character ends up in a bad situation, often worse than the original circumstances.

While Goffman's gender displays were originally created from magazine advertisements featuring photo images, the framework has also been successfully applied to video materials, such as television commercials (Browne 1998) and music videos (Wallis 2011). The analyzed mobile game advertisements further differ from these by being animated instead of being portrayed by actors. This means that each look and posture is intentional, and the advertisements can be more prone to exaggeration.

The focus in the analysis was on the advertisements' leading woman, or the MC, and her interaction with other characters. Instead of categorizing the advertisements into mutually exclusive categories, each video was coded depending on whether each gender display was found in the advertisement or not, which can better indicate prevalence of the identified genderisms (Smith 1996). The coding included two states for each category: 1 if it was found, and 0 if it was not present, and for some categories,

-1 if it was found but in a reversed gender display, and N/A if the category was not applicable to the advertisement – namely in the case of function rating if no tasks were completed together or relative size if there were no other characters (see Table 1). Some gender displays were repeated in a single advertisement, and in these cases, they were still coded only once per video. In addition to coding the gender displays, a more qualitative approach was implemented to consider meanings and implications of the situations connected to the coding.

Category	Features	Coding	Origin
Relative size	MC is shorter or smaller than other characters	Yes = 1 No = 0 Reversed = -1 Not applicable = N/A	Goffman 1979
Feminine touch	MC caresses objects or people by barely touching them MC delicately touches self	Yes = 1 No = 0	Goffman 1979
Function rating	Other character than MC in a leading or superior role MC is being instructed MC serves other characters	Yes = 1 No = 0 Reversed = -1 Not applicable = N/A	Goffman 1979
Ritualization of subordination	MC lowers herself in relation to others, for instance, bowing MC has a “bashful knee bend” posture MC tilts herself to a canting posture MC is lying down or crouching on the floor or on a bed	Yes = 1 No = 0	Goffman 1979

	MC averts gaze		
Licensed withdrawal	MC shows remorse, fear, shyness, or shock MC covers mouth or face with hand(s)	Yes = 1 No =0	Goffman 1979
Body display	MC wears revealing clothes (showing cleavage, showing skin above knee)	Yes = 1 No = 0	Kang 199
Confident appearing	MC has a confident stance, head held high	Yes = 1 No = 0	Kohrs an Gill 2021
Agency	MC makes a choice on her own MC shows anger or aggression	Yes = 1 No = 1	Original, based on Kang 199
Motherhood	MC has children MC is pregnant	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original, based on Goffman 1979
Romantic interest	MC has a romantic partner MC shows romantic/sexual interest towards a person	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original

Unattractive appearance	MC has unwanted body hair MC has unwanted body shape MC has tangled, scruffy or spiky hair, or no hair MC is visibly dirty MC is visibly smelly MC wears worn or dirty clothes MC has skin problems MC has messy makeup	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original
Oppression	MC is being cheated on or betrayed MC is being bullied or laughed at MC is the target of violence	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original
Tormenting	MC suffers from “player’s” actions	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original
Bad ending	MC is unhappy in the end MC is being oppressed in the end MC is in danger in the end	Yes = 1 No = 0	Original

Table 1: *The categories and coding scheme used in the analysis process.*

In addition to the gender displays, attention was drawn to the representations of the MC, considering race, sexuality, class, body

types, and gender expression. According to Shira Chess (2017), games that are aimed at female audiences paint a picture of a White, cisgendered, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class mother, and the advertisements mirrored this stereotype. In the following sections, I will highlight the main results of the analysis, starting with typical scenarios in each game, then discussing the presence of the gender displays, and finally considering other representational aspects.

RESULTS

Typical Scenarios

The advertisements for *Project Makeover* are typically about a woman who needs to change to be attractive enough, whether it is to attract a love interest or take revenge on someone making fun of her. Most *Project Makeover* advertisements revolve around a makeover, where "the player" is choosing how to change the MC's appearance. This can involve cleaning her up, removing body hair, adding makeup, and changing clothes, among other things. There are, on average, three choices in each advertisement, where "the player" chooses an item to use (see Figure 1), which can either improve or worsen the situation. The first choice is often successful, while the last choice almost always fails. Despite the steps, the advertisements almost exclusively end up in failures, and the prospective spouse runs away, or the woman is ridiculed even more. A sad or crying woman is sometimes displayed with an appeal to "Help the girl".

Project Makeover shows the MC as unattractive, in embarrassing situations, or being rejected, and the player's mission is to make her look good enough, often for other people. Each time the effort ends in failure, and the MC is embarrassed even more. The beauty standards are very traditional and somewhat toxic. For instance, body hair is unwanted, and in some cases, the only "wrong" thing, in the

end, is having hair that is too short, which can trigger a horrified reaction from a romantic interest. (Figure 1)[7]

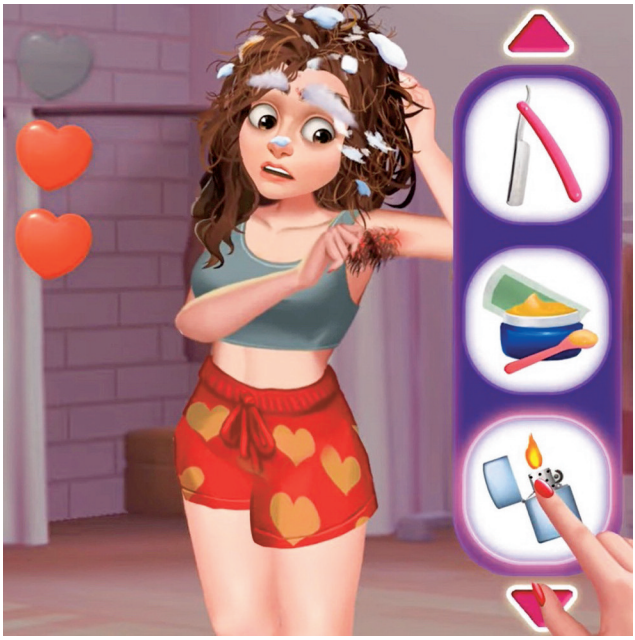

Figure 1: Making a choice how to remove armpit hair in an advertisement for Project Makeover. Screenshot from a YouTube video.

The *Matchington Mansion* advertisement typically features the MC in an unfortunate situation, for instance being thrown out of her home, or finding her partner cheating (see Figure 2). Whether she is kicked out or decides to leave her husband, it is MC who ends up leaving, often freezing in rain or snow, and is then seen in an old, cold house with a broken roof. The "player's" goal is then to make the house warmer and the MC happier. This is usually done by choosing an option that can be used to repair a part of the house. Similar to *Project Makeover*, this usually involves three steps. The first and

7. By user Project Makeover advertisements collection, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF9s64KdqXI

second step may succeed to warm the place, however, the third typically fails, making the situation even worse. In the end, the woman is seen freezing, with a text "Fail" on the screen.

In *Matchington Mansion* the situations are more severe: The MC and sometimes her children are in danger of freezing, even dying, after leaving her partner, or having been cast out. The player's goal is to make them safer and more comfortable, but the effort fails, with a hint that she is now facing death. (Figure 2)[8].

8. By user Potato Pseudo Gamer, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z8wKbXstcE

Figure 2: The premise of an advertisement for Matchington Mansion, where a pregnant woman (MC) sees her husband with another woman and being in shock, her water breaks. Screenshot from a YouTube video

Both games try to appeal to the viewer by presenting the MC as a sad, helpless person who is unable to improve her life, and waits to be helped. As the choices made by the "player" are often obviously

wrong (for instance using an iron on hair, or a hammer to fix a window), this may appeal to the viewer's inclination to think that they can do better. The sad expressions, directly at the camera, emphasize her feeling of helplessness. *Matchington Mansion* includes pregnant women or small children as the sufferers, most likely trying to make the viewer feel sympathetic, and help them by downloading the game.

While the focus here is not on a comparison of the advertisements and the actual gameplay of the games, it is worth mentioning that there is a clear discrepancy between the two. The scenarios in the advertisements do not appear in the games, and are clearly more provocative and dramatic than the storylines of the games. The main gameplay mechanics are shown in a misleading way: in the games there are no right or wrong choices, and they only have cosmetic effects, while in the advertisements the choices can potentially "save" the MC – or inevitably torment her. Both games include match-3 levels as their core gameplay, which are either completely missing or shown as overly simplified in the corresponding advertisements.

Gender Displays

Overview and comparison

The coding process resulted in numeric representation of each category. The numbers are shown as percentages in Table 2. A comparison of the presence of the analyzed categories in the two games is shown in Table 3. In the following sub-chapters I will discuss the most interesting findings.

Category	Present	Not present	Reversed	N/A
Relative size	27%	49%	15%	9%
Feminine touch	12%	88%		
Function rating	12%	3%	9%	76%
The ritualization of subordination	43%	55%	2%	
Licensed withdrawal	86%	14%		
Body display	59%	41%		
Confident appearing	12%	88%		
Lack of agency	52%	48%		
Motherhood	38%	62%		
Romantic interest	70%	30%		
Unattractive appearance	72%	28%		
Oppression	52%	48%		
Tormenting	75%	25%		
Bad ending	90%	10%		

Table 2: *The presence of each analyzed category in the dataset (n=100).*

Category	**Project Makeover**	**Matchington Mansion**
Relative size	22%	32%
Feminine touch	18%	6%
Function rating	8%	16%
The ritualization of subordination	22%	64%
Licensed withdrawal	88%	84%
Body display	48%	70%
Confident appearing	20%	4%
Lack of agency	54%	50%
Motherhood	4%	72%
Romantic interest	70%	70%
Unattractive appearance	98%	46%
Oppression	46%	58%
Tormenting	78%	72%
Bad ending	84%	96%

Table 3: *Comparison of the presence of each analyzed category in* Project Makeover *(n=50) and* Matchington Mansion *(n=50).*

Power relationship to men and sexualization

Relative size was not an especially fitting way to investigate the gender displays. It was coded as present when other characters looked larger than the MC, and as reversed when the MC looked

larger. However, the situations rarely seemed especially relevant to power positions as originally described by Goffman (1979). In addition, *function rating* was typically not found in the advertisements, as tasks were rarely done together. When present, men were somewhat more often in a position of power in *Matchington Mansion,* while in *Project Makeover* the division was equal. This is similar to Kang's (1997) findings where *relative size* and *function rating* were not prevalent in magazine advertisements.

In addition, *feminine touch* was not often found in the advertisements. While *body display* was found and coded in more than half of the advertisements, typically the clothes were not especially revealing or sexualized. These findings suggest that women in advertisements for games that are targeted at women, are not especially sexualized or submissive in power position displays, which can be explained with the lack of male gaze among the target audience. In contrast, the *ritualization of subordination* was found in various advertisements and especially in *Matchington Mansion*, where it was connected to *licensed withdrawal* (see next section) rather than showing submission related to other characters. These results show how the relationships between male and female genders have changed, at least in advertisements targeted towards women: even when women are suffering and losing confidence, they are not portrayed as submissive to the male gender.

Lack of agency and confidence

Agency was difficult to code due to the video format of the data. All the advertisements featured a lack of agency for the MC, as they were passively waiting for someone else to make decisions regarding their looks, or save them from a precarious situation. However, in some cases the MC also showed initiative by leaving a cheating husband, or by showing anger or defiance when they disliked a choice made by the "player". Even this type of agency was missing from around half of the analyzed advertisements, with only few showing more preva-

lent agency and independence. This mix of lack and inclusion of agency paints an image of a passive, helpless woman.

Confident appearing found in recent advertisements by Kohrs and Gill (2021) was not visible in these mobile game advertisements. Only 12% featured this gender display, and even then, it was almost always only for a moment when something went right before taking a turn for the worse again. The lack of confidence was supported by *licensed withdrawal*, which was prevalent in the advertisements, as the MC was often depicted as demoralized and dejected. Turning her gaze away graphically depicted these feelings, while burying her face in her hands shows strong emotions such as shock and fear.

Suffering and oppression

While the male gaze perspective was missing, the women, instead of being overly sexualized, were portrayed through another lens – as the sufferers. In half of the advertisements, someone in the game was actively harming the MC, whether by cheating, abandoning her, bullying her, making fun of her, or even physically harming her.

While the "players" are supposed to be the savior of the situation, they also participate in tormenting the MC. In *Project Makeover* the "player" could have made the MC's life better by helping her to find herself and her confidence through a makeover, but made the situation worse by burning or shaving off her hair, or dumping a bucket of mud on her. In some cases, the "player" chose the most ridiculous outfit for her, to bully her even more. In *Matchington Mansion* the "player" is supposed to make the environment safe and comfortable for the suffering woman, but ends up damaging the house even more, or setting it on fire, worsening the situation and even escalating it to hint at her approaching death, sometimes including her small child.

Representation

The advertisements paint a very narrow image of a woman, although in some ways, they also break the traditional stereotype. What is blatantly visible is that the overwhelming majority of the women are portrayed as White; only one analyzed advertisement out of a hundred featured a Black woman as the MC, with other races or ethnicities lacking altogether. The stereotyped representation largely follows the depiction by Chess (2017) of the designed identity being a White, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able- bodied middle-class woman who is also a mother. Motherhood is present especially in *Matchington Mansion* where the MC either has small children, or is pregnant in 38% of the advertisements analyzed. Instead of the nuclear family display by Goffman (1979), the family ends up revolving around the mother, with the father of the children ending up being out of the picture. The children are also taken in as a part of the narrative: a pregnant woman or a mother ending up as the sole caretaker with sad- looking children may yield even more sympathy.

In particular, heteronormativity stereotypes were broken; 10% of *Matchington Mansion* advertisements, and as many as 30% of *Project Makeover* advertisements featured queerness, typically lesbian relationships or same-sex attraction. This was a surprising find, especially as the portrayal of these relationships was comparable to the portrayal of heterosexual relationships, without any evident attempt to use queerness as shock value (as in the case of motherhood), to ridicule it (as in the case of physical appearance), or "straighten" the portrayal of lesbians (as in some cases in advertising, see Nölke 2018). While representations of queerness in games is nothing new (see Shaw & Friesem 2016), the wide occurrence of it among the advertisements negates the expectation of heteronormativity (Chess 2017), and may be a part of a larger trend of at least certain representations of queerness becoming more visible in advertising (Grau & Zotos 2016). This might mean queer audiences are seen as a desirable part of the target audience, while simultaneously queer representation is assumed to be less alienating for heterosexual audiences than it was previously (see Nölke 2018). The stereotype of the MC as a middle-class woman was also broken, especially in *Matchington Mansion*,

where the MC ended up being poor in the majority of the scenarios, living in a broken and freezing house, or in some cases, homeless. This emphasized the MC's role as the sufferer. In the case of traditional beauty values, the advertisements, especially in *Project Makeover*, end up showing untraditional representations of women, and simultaneously enforcing traditional beauty values: the MC is often portrayed with body hair, various body types, body odors, worn clothes or messy hair. These, however, were seen as problems that the "player" then tries to (unsuccessfully) fix for the MC. The advertisements follow gender binaries and expression in a similar way: no non-binary or trans characters were identified, and while the portrayed women sometimes had facial hair, this too was seen as a problem to be fixed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed the dual representations of women in advertisements on mobile games targeted at women. While they break the norms of having men as the main characters in digital game advertisements (Behm-Morawitz 2017), they represent women with stark stereotypes: as weak and helpless, needing to be rescued. There is a strong focus on the importance of women needing to be attractive to hold their life together. While stereotypical representation of genders is common in advertising (Shaikh et al. 2015), in these advertisements it was especially highlighted, simplified, and sometimes taken so far that it might seem absurd. As animations, body shapes and facial expressions can be exaggerated even more. This seems to be intentional; the provocative and often weird content tempts the viewer to watch and then click the advertisement to see what the game is about. If gender roles find their purest form in advertisements, as Goffman (1979) suggested, they seem to find absurd forms in mobile game advertisements.

Simultaneously, the content breaks some stereotypical power positions between men and women: as the target audience, and thus expected viewers, are women, it is not a man who needs to save the

woman, but another woman. The women are not represented as overly sexualized or feminine. Similarly, while representing a very narrow image of what a woman is like by connecting womanhood with romantic relationships and motherhood, they do break existing stereotypes by featuring queer women. It is also interesting to note that there is no similar development related to race. This might be telling of the assumed audience: Western, White women, but not necessarily heterosexual. The differences between the games are also telling and may reflect the audiences: in *Project Makeover* the situations are more related to romantic interests instead of families or children, possibly attracting an audience of younger women than *Matchington Mansion,* which has a larger representation of mothers.

As companies rarely reveal data about their audiences, targeted advertisements can be a way to find out more about the target audiences and their preferences. It is interesting to consider how the decisions regarding content and representation are made. In addition to intentional design, the efficiency of the advertisements can be measured. Therefore, it can be assumed that the types of advertisements that attract most viewers to the game, and possibly those who stay and spend money on the game, will survive and be repeated. Mobile game advertising also reflects the current trends on social media in general, where the competition for attention is sometimes fought with increasingly absurd content. Mobile game advertisements and their misleading, provocative, and confusing content is a part of larger phenomena, including viral videos, fake news, hoaxes, and clickbait journalism (see Silverman 2015). In a way, mobile game companies not only have to compete in an extremely saturated mobile game market, but also try to be visible among massive amounts of other marketing materials.

Advertisements usually seek to convey a desire to emulate the portrayed woman – to buy the products she is wearing or using. In the analyzed advertisements, the woman is not always to be identified with, but is to be pitied and helped. Therefore, the representation also differs. There is no sexual allure, except the absence of it. The woman is in the center, and stripped of agency and initiative,

she must wait to be helped – first by the fake player and then by the viewer. While the main female characters were the focus of this study, the image that these advertisements portray of men is equally problematic: men are shown as cheaters, cruel, childish, shallow, and aggressive. While they are often depicted in these advertisements with confidence and agency, they also show certain character weaknesses not included by the gendered advertisement framework.

There are two aspects of these advertisements that are possibly unethical: they present a false image of the games they advertise, and they often use stereotypes to show a misogynist worldview with a narrow view of how women are represented. While the misleading advertising is clearly a consumer protection issue, one of the main questions related to the content itself is then, what effects do these repeated narratives and portrayals of women have? As discussed earlier, the effects of advertisements on viewers and society are a complex issue. Nevertheless, many effects have been theorized (Dixon 2019; Pollay 1986). While an individual advertisement might have an insignificant effect, it is important to question the cumulative effect of these repeated scenarios seen in mobile game advertisements and other similar media content.

This paper investigated two games that were developed by the same company, however, similar advertisements are published for various other games, such as *Hollywood Story* (Nanobit 2016), *Family Farm Adventure* (Century Games Pte. Ltd. 2014), and *Solitaire Home Design* (Betta Games 2020). In addition to stereotypical representation that could be harmful in general, some of these advertisements include sexual content, violence, even domestic violence, or sexual assaults. The variety of stereotypes and questionable content is even wider when expanding to mobile game advertisements directed to male and other audiences. This study serves as an introduction to the intriguing, yet still overlooked field of mobile game advertising, combining critical media studies, gender studies, and political economy. In the future, this study can be expanded to look deeper into the connection of platform logics of mobile game advertising and the

content of the advertisements, and also expand the scope to games directed towards male and other audiences.

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