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Beyond Words. Exploring Sexist Hate Speech Online and in the Multimodal Advertising System

Abstract: Sexist hate speech is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, deeply rooted in our society, which can take different and dangerous forms, difficult to identify and tackle. As language affects our perception of the world, it is crucial to raise awareness of the most silent, implicit and potentially oppressive aspects of gender identity hate speech. First, the paper analyses the reasons why sexist speech represents an instance of hate speech, being characteristically hostile and oppressive. Indeed, it aims at silencing, excluding, and degrading the addressees of hate, without necessarily being violent. Second, the intersections of hate speech, sexist hate speech, and gender identity discrimination, as they manifest in multimodal advertisements, is examined with an insight into the underlying mechanisms and societal impact of such practices. Third, a discussion of the most representative cases of how the discourse of sexist hate speech is conveyed in the advertising systems of three different countries – Italy, UK, and France – is provided. Finally, the paper includes an overview of the most recent and effective practices adopted by the EU to assist member states in preventing and combating hate speech.

Keywords: *Sexist hate speech*, *linguistic ostracism*, *sexist advertisements*, *digital hate*, *gender equality*, *human rights*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, due to the digital revolution, the online world has become a "free" space where everyone can express their own opinion, without the control and adequacy to the standards imposed on the traditional communication media. Hence, similarly to other issues recently included in the human rights domain, such as vulnerability and discrimination by association, hate speech raises a few controversies, especially among those groups who fear the development and established protection of minorities and vulnerable groups.

The much wider availability of new technological communication tools has allowed us to be constantly connected with people everywhere in the world, to have access to global news and information and to experience different modes of expression. As discussed by KhosraviNik, the digital interface provides a number of communicative affordances.[1] For instance, it provides the opportunity to work together in producing content; perform interpersonal communication; and have access to see and respond to institutionally and user-generated content and texts. Hence, differently from offline communication, not only is the online space an interactive, multimodal reality for creating and sharing content continuously but also a virtual place that has empowered ordinary people to participate in text production and distribution.[2]

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that, apart from these undeniable communicative affordances, the immediate, free, and constant access to the web as active users and content producers

[1] Majid KhosraviNik, "Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS)", in John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson, eds., *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2017), 583-596.
[2] Majid KhosraviNik, "Critical Discourse Analysis, Power and New Media Discourse", in Yusuf Kalyango and Monika Kopytowska, eds., *Why Discourse Matters: Negotiating Identity in the Mediatized World* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 287-306.

has brought with it an increasing spread of online violence (or cyberhate). In other words, the online space has become "the new frontier for spreading hate".[3] An interesting study by KhosraviNik and Esposito investigates the main factors to be considered as responsible for the digital discourse of hate.[4] First, the anonymity of the authors is seen as crucial to boosting online aggressive and denigratory language. Indeed, the perceived or presumed anonymity of the users is closely linked to a disinhibited attitude, also known as the "Gyges effect", which refers to Plato's myth of invisibility. Hence, this notion of anonymity, on a continuum ranging from real to perceived anonymity, leads to the belief that cyberspace is a communicative context of a different nature from real, face-to-face interactions. It is considered less important and freer due to the physical separation between the interlocutors and the addressees of hate.

The article discusses the importance of situating patriarchy enforcing speech within the category of hate speech, particularly in those contexts where it does not necessarily assume the forms of violent and aggressive language. Indeed, the most salient feature of hate speech is that it is characteristically hostile and oppressive and tends to discriminate, vilify, degrade and silence the targeted group. "It constitutes an oppressive act and the oppressive function of hate speech is precisely what makes it morally, socially, and politically objectionable".[5] Therefore, it can be argued that sexist, misogynistic and gender identity hate speech, being intrinsically oppressive in their nature and function, constitute clear examples of oppression and ostracism without necessarily resorting to violence and aggressivity. Importantly, in the context of multimodal online advertising, the broader meaning of "language" is here adopted, including not only verbal language but all the multi-semiotic resources exploited by the advertising industry to portray gender identity and gender roles. Exploring different perspectives, from a sociolinguistic point of view, the work aims to shed light on the complex interface of linguistic hostility, ostracism and gender representation in the advertising system. First, a disambiguation of the concept is provided by pointing to the necessity to distinguish the different nuances that characterise a phenomenon with ancient roots but still not adequately defined and acknowledged, both socially and within the international legal framework. By comparing the most influential definitions of sexist hate speech, sexist speech, and misogynistic language, a broader and more inclusive concept of the language of hate is assumed. One which considers the multifaceted aspects of the issue, on a continuum that ranges from the most subtle and hidden sides of hatred language and ostracism, difficult to identify and tackle, to the most explicitly conveyed forms of sexism, discrimination, and hate.

Second, the various aspects of linguistic hostility and ostracism will be addressed within the multimodal framework of the online advertising systems to explore the most hidden, implicit, and subtle forms that hate speech may assume. Considering that hate speech is oppressive and patronising, aiming at subordinating and belittling its target, it follows that any form of gender identity, misogynistic and sexist speech should count as hate speech even though they often oppress without the face of violence. Nonetheless, once acknowledged that gender identity hate speech bears the key features and scope of hate speech, it is important to be aware that it represents an instance of hate speech that requires a specific analysis because of the peculiar and problematic nature of gender discrimination. Hence, the article contributes to the literature by filling the gap on the discourse of hate in contemporary society by providing a more nuanced account of the different forms that hate speech may assume in the digital advertising system. Specifically, drawing on the most relevant contributions to the study of language and gender, the paper explores a number of common features to identify subliminal, discriminatory or degrading messages in three countries - the UK, Italy, and France – with different legal frameworks to

[3] James Banks, "Regulating Hate Speech Online", *International Review of Law, Computers, and Technology*, 24.3 (2010), 234.
[4] Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally Mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-Based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 14.1 (2018), 45-68.
[5] Louise Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating: On Misogyny, Sexism, and Hate Speech", *Hypatia*, 33.2 (2018), 257.

address the phenomenon. To this end, the comparison among the selected study cases of British, Italian, and French advertising campaigns allows us to define distinct types of gender representation in multimodal averts as well as the specific linguistic and semiotic strategies employed. Additionally, the analysis provides valuable information on the approaches of the monitoring bodies and stakeholders involved in each country in combating sexist advertising. Finally, the last section is devoted to critical considerations of how sexist hate speech is handled in international human rights law. It points to the need to acknowledge and address hate speech both within the framework of gender equality instruments and the anti-hate speech framework established by international human rights bodies.

2. Defining Sexist Hate Speech(es): Linguistic Ostracism, Oppression, Hate

Considered within the framework of the international human rights law, hate speech is one of the most interesting, yet ambiguous phenomena to identify, acknowledge, and tackle. Indeed, the urge to develop a legal definition of hate speech was due to the necessity to indicate clear boundaries between freedom of expression on one hand, and sexist discrimination on the other. Indeed, any attempt to stop sexist hate speech online is constantly in contrast with those who claim that it operates within the area of restriction of freedom of expression. Such restrictions are only applicable in limited situations, including racist and/or homophobic statements. However, the path towards the inclusion of sexist hate speech within the same standards, offering the same protection granted against racist or homophobic hate, has not been easy. A first attempt towards a broader definition of hate speech, including different dimensions of the phenomenon comes from the Council of Europe (CoE): "All forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin".[6] Certainly, this definition does not portray the actual complex and digitalised modern society, where the Internet and the online sphere have become a "battlefield" over free speech.[7] Indeed, first, it does not take into account the profound impact that the language of hate has nowadays due to the spread of the new, digital communication tools. Second, gender equality and freedom of expression are seen very often as contrasting rather than intertwined principles because of the abused freedom of expression as a pretext to justify and legitimise cases of sexist hate speech. This conflict seems to be one of the major obstacles to fight sexist hate speech, especially because the digital media of communication (e.g. social media) are more difficult to control, being less obliged than the traditional media in terms of respect of the ethical standards and quality and reliability of the news and output.

A more detailed, specific definition, at the international level, taking into account sexist hate speech as a form of gender violence, can be found in the CoE in its Recommendation CM/Rec (2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism:

> Any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice or behaviours based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline, with the purpose or effect of: Violating the inherent dignity or rights of a person or a group of persons; or resulting in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic harm suffering to a person or a group of persons; or Creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment; or Constituting a

[6] Council of Europe (CoE), *Recommendation No. R(97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on "Hate Speech"*, 1997.

[7] Katarzyna Sękowska-Kozłowska1, Grażyna Baranowska, Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, "Sexist Hate Speech and the International Human Rights Law: Towards Legal Recognition of the Phenomenon by the United Nations and the Council of Europe", *International Journal Semiot Law*, 35 (2022), 2323-2345.

> barrier to the autonomy and full realisation of human rights by a person or a group of persons; or Maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes.[8]

Compared with the previous one, this definition constitutes a crucial step forward in the acknowledgement of sexist hate speech as an explicit form of violence and/or gender discrimination and ostracism towards specific minority groups. Indeed, in the CoE R(97), the only implicit reference to gender discrimination and/or hate speech could be found in the generic expression "discrimination and hostility against minorities". Instead, in the CoE CM/Rec (2019)1, it is clearly pointed out that sexism is based on the concept that "a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex". Not only does this claim include a much broader target, such as LGBTQ+ groups, but it also addresses the human rights protection of any vulnerable groups, specifically because of their gender and/or gender representation.

Another fundamental aspect that is worth discussing about the last definition, considering the impact of the new digital modes of communication, is the inclusion of the multimodal and multi-semiotic aspects of the phenomenon. Indeed, it refers to both "online and offline" speech, to written and spoken language. Also, it broadens the domain by citing any type of semiotic instrument we may exploit and resort to with the purpose of inciting or conveying hate: "any act, gesture, visual representation". This latter remark is particularly relevant for the current discussion in that it highlights the importance of going "beyond words", widening the domain of any mode of communication that may convey hostility towards the targeted minority group.

Hence, the CoE urges member states to take concrete and effective measures to prevent and combat sexist hate speech in all its manifestations, providing guidelines to implement appropriate legislation and policies. Indeed, considering the dramatic impact of this issue on the public and private lives of women, this recommendation represents a milestone in combating gender stereotypes and sexism, calling for specific actions by member states and pointing to any language and communication mode. It also marks the urge to introduce and implement legislation banning sexism in media and advertising, which will be the focus of the following sections.

Sexism and discrimination negatively affect any area of the personal and private life of people by imposing, implicitly or explicitly, certain societal roles to play and to conform to, based on their gender rather than their aptitudes, will, or ambitions. For example, women are less represented and less frequently found in decision-making positions such as in politics, law, and business. On the other hand, men have been traditionally seen as less involved in care work and are expected to behave in a more assertive way. However, it is important to highlight that sexism and gender-based bias also affect all those people who identify with a non-binary representation of biological sex. Indeed, looking at the findings of the survey published in May 2020 by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, a significant growth in the phenomenon of anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech can be noticed.[9]

As already mentioned, providing a definition of hate speech that may consider the different nuances of meaning, targets of hate and modes of communication is a controversial issue, still scholarly debated. Although it is not a recent phenomenon, lately, sexist hate speech has been taking a whole new dimension due to the spread of the Internet and social media as a new means of everyday communication. It may take many forms, depending on the medium used to convey hate and the type of victim it is targeted to. For instance, it can be sexist hate speech (i.e. gender-motivated hate speech), sexualised hate speech, cyber-sexism or cyber-gender harassment. Each of these expressions highlights different dimensions of gender-based hostility, with hate speech focused on incitement to violence or discrimination, sexualised

[8] Council of Europe, *Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on Preventing and Combating Sexism*, 2019.
[9] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "A long way to go for LGBTI equality" (2020), www.fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/eu-lgbti-survey-results.

hate speech integrating sexual degradation, and the cyber categories emphasising the digital context where this abuse occurs. Indeed, one of the key issues that creates obstacles, especially online, in detecting and tackling the phenomenon is the lack of clear-cut boundaries among the several aspects that the language of hate may assume. For instance, labelling every single act of sexist speech as hate speech can be misleading and may translate into a sort of trivialization of the problem of hate speech against women.

A first important clarification must be made between what can specifically be considered sexist hate speech and any other linguistic statements and expressions that, despite being oppressive, do not constitute examples of hate speech. This difference has been discussed and clarified in detail by Richardson-Self who draws a first line between "sexist speech" which is not hateful and "misogynistic speech", explicitly featured with hate speech.[10] According to the author, examples of sexist speech, not hateful, are to be found in all those oppressive linguistic expressions which lead to the marginalisation of women, such as patronising a grown woman by calling her "girl".[11] Thus, sexist speech differs significantly from misogynistic speech in that the latter shows some key traits of hate - i.e. violence, hostility, coercion – and it aims to stigmatise, vilify, and disparage its targets. Nonetheless, despite being aware of this important distinction and that both phenomena should be addressed with specific tools, in this paper, instead of adopting the label "misogynist speech", the expressions sexist speech and sexist hate speech will be preferred being the most used in international human rights law and academic contexts. Hence, the assumption that sexist speech falls into the category of hate speech is taken as a starting point since gender identity speech, sexism and misogyny, despite the different traits, all share the oppressive nature and the degrading function of hate speech, which is precisely what makes them socially and morally objectionable. degrading function of hate speech, which is precisely what makes them socially and morally objectionable.

One of the main problems faced when attempting to tackle sexist language is that it intrinsically belongs to the written and spoken linguistic code and, accordingly, it is difficult to change. Usually learned at an early age, sexist language could be considered a linguistic habit. Ruscher refers to a particular gender-biased language that implicitly excludes groups based on their gender and sexual orientation.[12] She maintains that expressions that exclude members of specific groups serve some of the functions of linguistic ostracism. For example, "an invitation to faculty and their wives or a statement that the office is undermanned suggests where women do and do not belong".[13] The negative evaluation and exclusion of the outgroup of women, thus, can also be conveyed through conversational conventions that are part of everyday speech and, although more subtle, they equally suggest that some groups are less visible or important.

Besides, among the reasons for this phenomenon, the lack of knowledge about what constitutes sexist hate speech may play a significant role. A study by Swim et al. sheds light on two important aspects of the issue under investigation.[14] That is, not only is sexist hate speech difficult to detect, but the lack of awareness of what can be considered as sexist hate speech also leads to a higher likelihood to perpetuate this behaviour. Based on a continuum of explicitness of the language of hate, the study provides an accurate definition of three diverse types of sexism: i.e. blatant, covert, and subtle. Blatant sexism is described as "obviously unequal and unfair treatment of women relative to men".[15] Covert sexism, on the other hand, is defined as "unequal and unfair treatment of women that is recognised but purposefully

[10] Louise Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating: On Misogyny, Sexism, and Hate Speech", *Hypatia,* 33.2(2018), 256-272.
[11] Ibid., 261-262.
[12] Janet B. Ruscher, *Prejudiced Communication: A Social Psychological Perspective* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).
[13] Ibid., 42.
[14] Janet K. Swim, Robyn Mallet, Charles Stangor, "Understanding Subtle Sexism: Detection and Use of Sexist Language", *Sex Roles*, 51.3-4 (2004), 117-128.
[15] Ibid., 117.

hidden from view".[16] On one hand, blatant and covert sexism are easier to detect and recognise as forms of discriminating language, on the other, covert sexism is more hidden, being conveyed in a less explicit form. Finally, the last type of sexism discussed is subtle sexism. Specifically, "(it) represents unequal and unfair treatment of women that is not recognised by many people because it is perceived to be normative, and therefore does not appear to be unusual" (117). Thus, sexist hate speech, in many cases, has been reported to be hidden in the form of subtle sexism in that it consists of speech that implicitly reinforces and perpetuates gender stereotypes and status differences between women and men.[17]

Interestingly, it has been argued that unlike old-fashioned sexists who explicitly endorse gender inequality and traditional gender roles, modern sexists express beliefs that indirectly condone the unequal treatment of women and men.[18] What is dangerous about subtle sexism is that it may not be noticed at all when certain behaviours are not overtly defined as sexist and, consequently, it is not considered problematic. Neo-sexist beliefs, indeed, have been associated with a lower ability to detect and label sexist conduct as sexist. What is more, such a lack of awareness correlates with higher levels of engagement in such behaviour since, as it has been observed, it is not possible to notice or/label sexist behaviours and to act against this conduct.

To better understand what subtle sexism might look like, it is worth analysing two examples provided by Richardson-Self. First: "Imagine that a man exclusively calls women girls, without much conscious reflection on why he does it, and that he does so without expressing any ill will. This nonetheless implies the inferior status of women to (implicitly) adult men, and as such (again, implicitly) justifies men's being given more credence and authority".[19] It can be noticed that this apparently harmless expression, in fact, tends to attribute a lower status to women. What is more, Lynne Tirrell marked the socio-economic consequences that the expression may have on women in the following terms: "Its inappropriate use for an adult woman serves a purpose, to rationalise paying her less for her work, treating her as incapable of making serious decisions, and similar sorts of behaviours that undercut the full expression of her autonomy".[20]

The second example concerns the assumption that all women undertake forms of feminine-coded labour that are confined to the household. Specifically, the former Prime Minister of Australia Tony Abbott once remarked, "What the women of Australia need to understand, as they do the ironing" while explaining the economics of carbon pricing.[21] This can be considered as a subtle form of sexism in that not only does it present as natural and inevitable the gendered division of labour but, most importantly, it implicitly characterises women as cognitively inferior to men. Indeed, it portrays women as unable to understand the nuances of carbon pricing. In other words, they are unable to get important public, worldly matters from economics and science.

3. Sexism and Gender-Based Discrimination in Online Advertising Systems

The rise of online platforms has transformed advertising into a powerful tool that reaches global audiences instantly. However, this shift has also facilitated the spread of harmful content, including hate speech and discriminatory messaging embedded within digital ads. As already argued, the most pervasive form is sexist hate speech, where gender-based hostility intersects with broader patterns of

[16] Ibid.
[17] See for example: Mary Crawford, "Gender and Language", in R. K. Unger, eds., *Handbook of Psychology of Women and Gender* (New York: Wiley, 2001), 228-244.
[18] Swim et al., "Understanding Subtle Sexism".
[19] Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating", 261.
[20] Lynne Tirrell, "Genocidal Language Games", in Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan, eds., *Speech and Harm: Controversies over Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193.
[21] As reported in Richardson-Self, "Woman-Hating", 262.

online discrimination. These dynamics are often normalised in targeted ads that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, undermine equality, and reinforce exclusionary norms.

Indeed, due to the potential perception of women as preferred targets for sexually aggressive behaviours, the language of advertisements has been the object of extensive research focused on the correlation between perpetuating certain stereotyped images of women and men and the promotion of gender-based aggressive behaviour, sexism, and objectification.[22] Indeed, advertising is a particularly fruitful scenario to investigate the impact of gender models and sexism conveyed by online media advertising systems. According to the social learning theory proposed by Bandura and Walters in 1963, people model their behaviours based on the observation and imitation of the models they are exposed to.[23] If one considers the persuasive technique of the language of adverts and all the multimodal and multi-semiotic resources it exploits, it follows that the damaging and oppressive attitudes and standards conveyed by certain adverts are likely to be considered normal or, even worse, desirable. When applying this theory to hate speech, gender discrimination, oppression, and ostracism, it is worrying to see the harmful impact this practice has on the victims' health and well-being, and on their personal and professional lives. A report by Alexander et al. shows that people are influenced by advertising to such an extent that they are limited in their capacities to resist it. In other words, we have little choice about how we respond to advertised messages. Although not consciously aware, we hear or see a message, we process it, and such a message affects and limits our behaviour.[24]

Hence, as we have seen, sexist and gender stereotypes pervade the world of online advertising systems with detrimental effects on the health, self-esteem, self-perception, and personal choices of the victims. What emerges after a close look at the existing European normative framework, together with the provision of codes of ethics/conducts and various guidelines on sexist adverts is that, overall, sexist advertising features can be distinguished as follows:

- Gender stereotypes;
- Denigratory, humiliating or offensive attitudes towards one sex/gender;
- Objectification;
- Sexualisation;
- Nudity;
- Gender-based violence.[25]

Gender stereotypes employed by sexist advertising campaigns resort to gender clichés condensing a limited perception of what we consider (or ought to consider) as feminine and masculine. These stereotypes can be of a different nature: i.e. descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive.[26] The first defines beliefs about how men and women typically act; the second concerns beliefs about how they should act; the third refers to features that are not desirable for either gender but are permitted for one of the two and proscribed for the other. All of them have been seen to have a profound impact in terms of restricting aspirations, limiting potential, expectations and, therefore, social participation of both women and men. A study by Stewart et al. provided evidence to maintain that attitudes towards gender stereotypes could

[22] Kyra Lanis and Katherine Covell, "Images of Women in Advertisements: Effects on Attitudes Related to Sexual Aggression", *Sex Roles,* 32.9-10 (1995), 639-649.
[23] As reported in CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising: Ways Ahead", February 2023, 12.
[24] Jon Alexander, Tom Crompton, Guy Shrubsole, "Think of me as Evil? Opening the ethical debates in advertising", *Public Interest Research Centre and WWF-UK*, 2011.
[25] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 19.
[26] Anne Koening, "Comparing Prescriptive and Descriptive Gender Stereotypes About Children, Adults, and the Elderly", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), 2.

be shifted by increasing awareness of gender norms, which will translate into a change of attitude.[27] Indeed, the authors point out that a change of route is needed and that adverts may have a fundamental role in this respect, by breaking down the same gender stereotypes they have been portraying since the early days and discontinuing their perpetuation.

As regards the second type of sexist advertising, based on denigratory, humiliating or offensive attitude towards one sex/gender, it implies the representation of one sex/gender in such a way that can be considered offending. This can be conveyed, for instance, by showing somebody as unable to act in a certain way, think rationally, or perform a task because of their gender. Yet, other possible scenarios referring to these types of sexism in adverts include the depiction of one gender, usually women, as servile to the other or being socially, emotionally or economically subordinated.

Objectification of the human body through sexist advertising contributes to the promotion of gender-based violence against women. Besides, it is important to notice that sexualisation and objectification in adverts often overlap, in that people may be objectified in a sexualised manner. Specifically, objectification can be defined as "the process of treating someone as an object rather than as a human being".[28] An example could be depicting a static body to advertise a service or a product that is unrelated to it. Additionally, the person's body may appear as a mere decoration, replaced with pieces of objects, and/or portrayed with animal-like features. Notably, sexualisation is the most widely used technique to sell services and products and occurs when one or multiple elements are included such as a focus on erogenous body parts, a depiction of body-shaped objects, or visual associations established between some products and a person's body form, pornographic representations, people portrayed as sexually available, in overly sexualised gaze or in submissive positions. In most of these cases, the advertised goods have nothing to do with sexuality or reproductive rights.

An interesting study by McKenzie et al. analyses the way in which recent adverts have been influenced by post-feminist notions of women's freedom and equality by substituting the traditional images of women committed to family care and children with images of women as sexually in power, independent and ambitious.[29] This controversial issue opposes advertising agencies and the CoE. The first claim that they have embraced the changing cultural ideals of our society providing, in their view, a progressive and empowering role of women nowadays. On the other hand, the point of view of the CoE is that such "empowered" portrayals, in fact, have a damaging impact on women's bodies and image. Indeed, it has been argued that these representations undermine any effort made to achieve gender equality by associating women's success and empowerment with physical attractiveness, sexuality, and desirability to men.

Closely related to the two phenomena just described – objectification and sexualisation – is the portrayal of gender-based violence in commercials. Indeed, according to Gurrieri and Hoffmann, when the perpetuation of gender-based violence in adverts is correlated with attitudes and social behaviour that tolerates hate, in particular violence against women, the aggressive conduct is supported by sexist beliefs, and blames victims for sexual violence.[30] Yet, the greater tolerance of sexual aggression, considering gender-based violence as normal, leads to a higher degree of acceptability of men's use of sexually coercive attitudes. Indeed we are exposed daily to scenarios where violence is normalised or even made attractive. Adverts present aggressive language and attitudes as amusing, sensual, pleasing,

[27] Rebecca Stewart et al., "*Gendered stereotypes and norms: A systematic review of interventions designed to shift attitudes and behaviour"*, *Heliyon*, 7.4 (2021), e06660.
[28] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 20.
[29] Mandy McKenzie M. et al., "Advertising (In)equality: the Impact of Sexist Advertising on Women's Health and Wellbeing", *Women's Health Victoria*, Melbourne, 2018.
[30] Lauren Gurrieri and Rob Hoffmann, "Addressing and Preventing Sexist Advertising: An Analysis of Local and Global Promising Practice", RMIT University, Melbourne, 2019.

and powerful. However, as it has been noticed, images, models and language that convey violence lead to a society that supports and tolerates violence and blames the victims.

Finally, another significant point that is worth discussing about gender representation in adverts concerns how the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed. First of all, LGBTQ+ people are excluded from adverts in most cases since heterosexuality is usually presented as the norm. On the other hand, in those rare cases when the LGBTQ+ community is portrayed, they present stereotyped images such as gay men denied of their maleness and associated with female attributes such as a particularly well-groomed appearance, language, and way of talking. Usually, they are employed to sell beauty, fashion, and home décor goods, traditionally associated with women. As regards lesbian women, they are represented in ways which deny their femaleness, i.e. unwomanly or even manly, and shown in erotic poses meant to attract the heterosexual target.[31]

4. A Comparative Overview of Case Studies of Discriminatory Advertising: UK, Italy, France

To better understand how subtle sexism is conveyed in advertising, the following section explores a number of case studies of adverts which have been the object of debate for sexist content and/or form, in countries with a different regulatory framework on sexist hate speech and discriminatory language in adverts. Indeed, the cases presented – UK, Italy and France – allow us to analyse and compare the multimodal and multi-semiotic resources employed to convey the most hidden face of hatred language: i.e. discrimination, oppression, and ostracism without the face of violence. Besides, an overview of the practices undertaken to combat sexist and discriminatory adverts will be presented to reflect on the necessary decisions and actions that are worth considering in future to combat the phenomenon, aiming to create an international framework as a coherent and reliable point of reference.

As regards the UK, a ban on adverts featuring "harmful gender stereotypes" or those which are likely to cause "serious or widespread offence" was introduced in 2019[32] by the British advertising control body. Scenarios such as a man with his feet up while a woman cleans, or a woman failing to park a car have been the object of censure. The new rule follows a review of gender stereotyping in adverts by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) - the organisation that administers the UK Advertising Codes, covering both broadcast and non-broadcast adverts, including online and social media.[33] The ASA review showed that harmful stereotypes could "restrict the choices, aspirations and opportunities of children, young people and adults and these stereotypes can be reinforced by some advertising, which plays a part in unequal gender outcomes". The BBC reported the ASA chief executive's point of view on this matter: "Our evidence shows how harmful gender stereotypes in ads can contribute to inequality in society, with costs for all of us. Put simply, we found that some portrayals in ads can, over time, play a part in limiting people's potential".[34]

Hence, not only do images and stereotypes portrayed in adverts affect the way we perceive ourselves, the social attitudes and roles attributed to women and men, but they also contribute to creating invisible, subtle obstacles to the social and professional participation of people being stigmatised and objectified. A further aspect that is worth noticing about the ASA report concerns the collection of data based on people's perceptions and reactions to harmful gender stereotypical images conveyed in some emblematic adverts. Among the most representative cases, there is a 2017 television advert for *Aptamil* baby milk

[31] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 22; Antonio Fruttaldo, "Communing Affiliation and the Power of Bonding Icons in Collective Narratives. The Case of #GrowingUpGay", in *Language, Heart, and Mind: Studies at the Intersection of Emotion and Cognition*, 66 (Berlino: Peter Lang, 2020), 283-301.
[32] "'Harmful' Gender Stereotypes in Adverts Banned", *BBC* (14 June 2019), www.bbc.com/news/business-48628678.
[33] Advertising Standard Authority (ASA), "Depictions, Perceptions and Harm – A Report on Gender Stereotypes in Advertising", (2017).
[34] "'Harmful' Gender Stereotypes".

formula, which showed a baby girl growing up to be a ballerina and baby boys becoming engineers and mountain climbers as adults. The evidence suggested that some parents felt strongly about the gender-based aspirations shown in this advert noting the stereotypical future professions of the boys and girls shown. More specifically, parents pointed to the lack of diversity in gender roles, which are not representative of our society.

Other examples of adverts that are likely to be banned, according to the new British regulation, include:

- Adverts which show a man or a woman failing at a task because of their gender, like a man failing to change a nappy or a woman failing to park;
- Adverts aimed at new mothers which suggest that looking good or keeping a home tidy is more important than emotional well-being;
- Adverts which belittle a man for carrying out stereotypically female tasks.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the new rules do not preclude the use of all gender stereotypes. Instead, the main goal of ASA was to identify "specific harms" that should be avoided. So, for instance, it would still be possible to show women doing the shopping or men doing DIY or use gender stereotypes as a way of challenging their negative effects.

Along the same line, recent research, carried out in Italy by Valtorta et al. provides updated findings on gender stereotypes in Italian children's TV commercials.[35] In particular, it documents the presence of sexualisation, highlighting the negative consequences it has on girls, including body dissatisfaction, depression, and lower self-esteem, as well as adverse effects on girls' relationships with their peers.[36] Indeed, this media reinforcement has significant implications for children, shaping their perceptions of gender roles. Previous research findings indicate that stereotypical media representations contribute to children's acceptance of gender-stereotyped beliefs, which are linked to bullying and ostracism of gender-nonconforming peers.[37]

More specifically, the aforementioned study by Valtorta et al. provides a content analysis of 185 commercials, aired between 6 pm and 8:30 pm on the three most popular Italian children's channels, was conducted. Two raters coded variables such as verbs used, voice-over characteristics, settings, pace, and activities of main characters, facilitating comparisons with previous research on gender stereotyping. The findings shed light on the role of communication media as socialisation agents that continuously affect individual behaviours and attitudes. Additionally, it can be inferred that advertising also wields an influence on the socialisation process. It is considered to have unintended consequences on the values and lifestyles adopted by members of society, especially children. Commercials targeting girls frequently featured prosocial verbs, feminine voice-overs, domestic settings, and themes of warmth and interaction. In contrast, those aimed at boys included more antisocial verbs, masculine voice-overs, non-domestic settings, and themes related to technical information and competitiveness. Boys were depicted engaging in active and competitive activities, such as running and solving brain teasers, while girls were shown

[35] Roberta Rosa Valtorta et al., "Gender Stereotypes and Sexualization in Italian Children's Television Advertisements", *Sexuality & Culture*, 27 (2023), 1625-1645.

[36] Lisa Groesz et al., "The Effect of Experimental Presentation of Thin Media Images on Body Satisfaction: A Meta-analytic Review", *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 31 (2002), 1-16; Amanda J. Holmstrom, "The Effects of the Media on Body Image: A Meta-analysis", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48 (2004), 196-217; Rocìo Rivadeneyra et al., "Distorted Reflections: Media Exposure and Latino Adolescents' Conceptions of Self", *Media Psychology*, 9 (2007), 261-290.

[37] Alexandra Henning et al., "Do Stereotypic Images in Video Games Affect Attitudes and Behavior? Adolescent Perspectives", *Children, Youth and Environments*, 19.1 (2009),170-196; Erica S. Weisgram et al., "Pink Gives Girls Permission: Exploring the Roles of Explicit Gender Labels and Gender-Typed Colours on Preschool Children's Toy Preferences", *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 35 (2014), 401-409; Jennifer J. Pike et al., "The Effects of Commercials on Children's Perceptions of Gender Appropriate Toy Use", *Sex Roles*, 52.1-2 (2005), 83-91.

playing with dolls, engaging in domestic tasks, and applying makeup. Although the overall level of sexualisation was low, girls were more sexualized than boys, particularly through "adultification". This included depictions of girls in adult poses and wearing adult accessories or tight-fitting clothing. This gender disparity in sexualisation aligns with the findings of another study, by Owen and Padron, revealing that girls' action-figure narratives contained more social words, while boys' action-figure narratives emphasised power and aggression.[38]

To contrast the phenomenon, a major step forward in the Italian Legal framework has been the approval of the 'Infrastructure Decree' (Decree-Law No. 121 of 10 September 2021). Italy's senate agreed, with 190 to 34 votes, to ban any adverts which consist of sexist, discriminatory, or anti-abortion content from appearing anywhere across their entire transportation infrastructure. In particular, the transport and infrastructure decree bans adverts in public that are seen to perpetuate stereotypes about women and minority ethnic or religious groups, as well as any adverts that discriminate against gender identity or orientation.

The central issue prompting the implementation of the ban is that posters on streets and on transportation are "injurious to individual freedom". The decree amends, among others, Article 23 of the Highway Code (Decree Law 285/1992) on advertising on roads and vehicles, inserting a paragraph 4-bis, which states that "any form of advertising whose content proposes sexist or violent messages or offensive gender stereotypes or messages that violate respect for individual freedoms, civil and political rights, religious beliefs or ethnicity, or that is discriminatory with reference to sexual orientation, gender identity or physical and mental abilities is forbidden on roads and vehicles". Subsequent paragraphs 4-ter and 4-quater provide for the issuance of a ministerial decree of enforcement, and the sanction for the violation (revocation of the posting authorisation by the road owner). Nonetheless, it must be noted that this Law does not apply to the online and Television advertising system.

For a thorough understanding of the different gender representations of British and Italian TV advertisements, it is worth referring to Centonze and Taronna's comparative analysis of gender stereotypes and sexism in English language, considering an English-speaking country and a non-English speaking country: *i.e.* Britain and Italy.[39] In particular, the results of this interlinguistic and comparative research have brought about interesting data demonstrating the diversified aspect of discriminatory gender identity construction in the two nations. For example, female roles characterising the Italian section of the corpus are represented in a more traditional way than in the English section (53.2% vs 23.8%). Nonetheless, these results are not in line with the data referred to the decorative roles of women in Italy and in the UK. Indeed, based on the previous factor under investigation concerning female role characterisation, one would expect a higher percentage of decorative roles in the Italian advertising system. Instead, these roles are less recurrent in the Italian corpus than in the English one (17.7% vs 23.4%).

An interpretation that has been advanced concerns the prevalence of cosmetic/care body products in the English section of the corpus. Another, more interesting account relates to the different distribution of female co-presence in the corpus. In fact, women are represented alone in the English sub-section of the corpus while women-men co-presence is very low. This would explain the notion of an overall non-traditional representation of women, as empowered human beings within the society. This image of women in power is also confirmed by the pragma-linguistic analysis of the study. The use of the first-person pronoun together with hedging strategies aiming at making the female protagonist's voice heard, highlight a sense of female empowerment and autonomy. For instance, the study marked the use of

[38] Patricia Owen and Monica Padron, "The Language of Toys: Gendered Language in Toy Advertisements", *Journal of Research on Women and Gender*, 6.1 (2015), 67-80.

[39] Laura Centonze and Annarita Taronna, "A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Representations in British and Italian TV Advertisements", in Lucia Abbamonte and Flavia Cavaliere, eds., *Updating Discourse/s on Method/s*, *MediAzioni*, 34 (2022), A116-A141.

assertive and modal verbs expressing the protagonist's confidence to act, against the stereotyped gender models propounding submissive women.

As regards the case of France, it is particularly relevant to resolve the apparent contrast, already introduced, between freedom of expression and human rights when dealing with sexist hate speech online. The issue has been resolved by the French Media Law in the following terms by the Freedom of Communication Law: "Audio-visual communication is free. The exercise of this freedom may be limited to the extent required […], for the respect of human dignity, the freedom and property of other people, and the pluralistic nature of the expression of ideas and opinions". In addition, Law n. 2006-396 introduces a specific provision against discrimination in audio-visual communication media. In particular, the High Authority for Audio-visual Media (Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel or CSA) ensures that human dignity is respected in all publicly transmitted programmes and sanctions all programmes that break the law.

Hence, this is the body in charge of monitoring the respect for women's rights in the advertising field. Interestingly, in 2017, the CSA published the results of a study analysing 2000 advertising spots broadcasted between 2016 and 2017.[40] Considering how alarming the results were in terms of sexism and gender discrimination, the institution initiated a discussion with the representative of the media communications, and advertising sectors to work together towards the achievement of the same goal: fighting against sexual, sexist, and gender stereotypes in adverts. One of the most important outcomes of this initiative was the development of a Charter, signed on a voluntary commitment by the entities involved in March 2018.

Another relevant public institution with the aim of ensuring gender equality in the media is the High Council of Equality between Women and Men (Haute Conseil à l'Egalité entre les Femmes et les Hommes – HCEfh). When sexism in adverts or gender discrimination is identified in the media, the HCEfh notifies the relevant institution. An example of an advert that has been considered sexist by the HCEfh is one published by an Internet service provider in 2014 which included the following slogans: "Download as fast as your wife changes her mind" and "Download as fast as your husband forgets his promises". Both were considered as discriminatory based on sexist clichés, but the first was accused of conveying a denigratory, undermining image of women as not being able to make rational decisions. The Jury of Ethics reviewed this complaint and confirmed the sexist content of the advert.[41]

Gurrieri and Hoffmann highlight a particular aspect of the French legislative framework in terms of control and sanctioning of outdoor advertisements.[42] Indeed, the CSA can only exercise control over audio-visual broadcast content. Accordingly, a significant portion of advertising systems including, for example, posters and billboards, is excluded. In these cases, the decisions on discrimination issues are taken by the Professional Advertising Regulation Authority (ARPP), an advertising self-regulation mechanism created in June 2008. An example of a billboard which has been banned by the ARPP is a 2017 poster by the well-known fashion brand Yves Saint Laurent.[43] After receiving more than 120 formal complaints in Paris, the brand was ordered to modify the visual because it incontestably breached the self-regulatory code. Indeed, the poster was accused of representing a degrading image of women, featuring models in fishnet tights and high-heeled roller skates, legs splayed, striking a pose in a suggestive position.

[40] Le Conseil superieur de l'audiovisuel, *Women's representation in TV advertising*, 2017.
[41] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 30.
[42] Lauren Gurrieri and Rob Hoffmann, *Addressing and preventing sexist advertising: An analysis of local and global promising practice* (Melbourne: RMIT University, 2019).
[43] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 30; Julien Rath, "Paris voted to Ban 'Sexist and Discriminatory' Outdoor Ads", *Business Insider* (2017), www.businessinsider.com/paris-voted-to-ban-sexist-and-discriminatory-outdoor-ads-2017-3.

5. Conclusions

It has been seen how online platforms have become a breeding ground for the perpetuation of different and multilayered forms of hate toward specific targets, especially women, contributing to their silencing, marginalisation, and exclusion. In other words, the digital sphere has now become the ideal space for what has recently been defined by Balirano as the "Mantropocene", the enactment and perpetuation of misogynist hate and offensive behaviour.[44] Hence, understanding how to properly situate patriarchy and subordinating speech is paramount and requires a broader, interdisciplinary approach going "beyond words", including the analysis of all the multi-semiotic resources exploited by the advertising system in different contexts.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the current discussion is that the insidious phenomenon of hate speech, in its intersection with sexism, ostracism and discrimination in the digital sphere, may often assume various forms which are very difficult to recognise, detect, and tackle. Indeed, it has been discussed that sexist speech, despite the peculiar nature of gender identity subordination, still falls within the category of hate speech, offering a clear example of oppression without (necessarily) the face of violence. Nonetheless, what emerges from the analysis on gender representation in the British, Italian, and French advertisements included here is that sexism, misogyny and, in general, gender identity hate speech share the same characterising features of hostility, ostracism, vilification, and discrimination towards the targeted groups. In particular, in all the three countries, it is possible to identify the presence of subtle sexism, which on one hand reinforces and perpetuates gender stereotypes and status differences between men and women while, on the other, conveys a very limited, objectified and sexualised representation of the human body.

The most significant and alarming consequences of these factors can be summarised in terms of ostracism, greater societal tolerance towards gender-based violence, body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem of the victims. It is important to notice that the UK, Italy, and France all are aware of the major role played by these communication media with the degrading and undermining images they portray. Indeed, on one hand they contribute to creating subtle and invisible obstacles to the social and professional participation of the people being stigmatised while, on the other hand, they tend to create a society that tolerates this form of oppression since it is not immediately recognisable as an explicit act of violence. Hence, all these countries have taken action to contrast the subtle sexism of online and off-line adverts, including posters and billboards on the street. However, a particular aspect of the French legislative framework dealing with advertisements that is worth reporting is that it can only exert control over audio-visual content. This means that a significant portion of the advertising system, such as posters and billboards on the street, is then excluded.

Besides, it is crucial that any discussion on sexist hate speech be preceded by a premise on which aspect of the phenomenon we are addressing and in which context it is occurring (i.e. digital, physical, national, international). Thus, from a sociolinguistic point of view, as it has been argued, it is important to acknowledge sexist speech as a form of hate speech that tends to oppress, silence, exclude, and vilify the addressees of this insidious form of hate, with alarming consequences for the target group. On the other hand, from a legal point of view, being able to distinguish between sexist speech and sexist hate speech permits us to consider the latter as a form of violence against women and/or gender-based minorities and to sanction it appropriately.[45] Indeed, it is not just a labelling issue since sexist speech and sexist hate speech are often treated differently in legal frameworks being the former more extreme

[44] Giuseppe Balirano, "On the Margins of the Manthropocene: Semiotic Violence against Women in Politics as a Form of Diamesic Creativity", *Margins Marges Margini*, 1.1 (2023), 56-78.
[45] Katarzyna Sękowska-Kozłowska1 et al., "Sexist Hate Speech and the International Human Rights Law", *International Journal Semiot Law*, 35 (2022), 2323-2345.

and often explicitly outlawed under international human rights standards, while the latter in general, including sexist advertising, can fall under regulatory and soft law approaches that focus on discouraging rather than criminalising the behaviour.

Thus, both sexist speech and sexist hate speech ought to be considered as human rights issues, handled internationally by means of the anti-stereotyping framework of CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention, imposing on state parties obligations to contrast gender stereotypes through education and media monitoring.[46] Nonetheless, the revised CEDAW Committee's GR N. 35 of 2017 does not directly address hate speech against women as a specific form of violence. The only advancement is the introduction of a general reference to "contemporary forms of violence occurring online and in other digital environments".[47] Hence, considering that the advertising domain is a fruitful scenario for spreading sexist hate speech, acknowledging its specific nature could be an important achievement towards the elimination of the phenomenon.

Hence, significant advancements within international human rights law can be acknowledged. For instance, one cannot overlook the provisions developed to be used as reference points to address hate speech within the context of the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination. Among the most recent documents, adopted by the CoE, the 2018-2023 Gender Equality Strategy is noteworthy. Its main purpose is to identify the goals and priorities of the CoE on gender equality, the working methods and strategies to prevent and combat gender stereotypes and sexism.[48] What is particularly relevant, for the purpose of the current discussion, is that the role of media, social media and advertising has been emphasised and included in one of the most important Strategic Objectives. Indeed, the CoE has pointed the need to take the following action: "to prepare a draft recommendation to prevent and combat sexism, including guidelines to prevent and combat it online and offline, covering new forms of sexism affecting women and men in private and public spaces, and addressing sexist language…, sexist hate speech, sexism in media and in advertising".[49]

Yet, two additional problematic aspects that need further investigation and improvement are, on one hand, the lack of an internationally acknowledged, coherent legal framework to detect and combat hate speech in the digital sphere. On the other, the need to refine the linguistic and technological tools available to disambiguate the soft boundaries between what can be labelled as "hate speech" and what falls instead within the principle of "freedom of expression".

[46] United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, "CEDAW/C/GC/35" (2017).
[47] Ibid., 20.
[48] Council of Europe, *Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023* (coe.int), https://rm.coe.int/ge-strategy-2018-2023/1680791246.
[49] CoE, "Combating Sexist Advertising", 17.