



SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ADVERTISING ON FREE-TO-AIR TELEVISION IN MEXICO

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ADVERTISING ON FREE-TO-AIR TELEVISION IN MEXICO

Gloria Sandoval Méndez

National Technological Institute of Mexico/I.T. De
Pachuca <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5830-0969>
gloriasandovalmendez28@gmail.com

Cruz Jiménez Regina

National Technological Institute of Mexico/I.T. De
Pachuca <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6068-9104>
regina.cj@pachuca.tecnm.mx

Mohedano Torres Enrique de Jesús

National Technological Institute of Mexico/I.T. De
Pachuca <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0219-5038>
enrique.mt@pachuca.tecnm.mx

Mijares Díaz de León José Elías

National Technological Institute of Mexico/I.T. De
Pachuca <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4032-6148>
jose.md@pachuca.tecnm.mx

López Espinosa Maribel

National Technological Institute of Mexico/I.T. De
Pachuca <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7684-5791>
l22200829@pachuca.tecnm.mx

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61273/neyart.v4i1.169>

| Received: 12/07/2025 | Accepted: 02/11/2026 | Published: 03/15/2026

This work is
licensed under an
international
Creative Commons Attribution 4.0.





Abstract-- Advertising messages are an omnipresent part of daily life, conveying symbolic messages that influence human behavior. Within this advertising, relationships of domination and inequality are reproduced, exerting power both directly and subconsciously, often with the implicit consent of the audience—a phenomenon known as symbolic violence, which historically has been directed toward women. Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze its manifestations; to this end, an analysis of advertising content was conducted on the two main free-to-air television channels in Mexico. The analysis identified a greater presence of women in advertising content (66%) compared to men (34%). Among the main manifestations of this violence, the role of child-rearing assigned to women stands out, as well as gender stereotypes associated with beauty, such as youth (53.8% of characters between 20 and 30 years old), skin tone (60% fair to light skin), and body type (88% with a slim body type). On the other hand, visual objectification is significantly evident through the focus on erogenous zones and revealing clothing. Finally, there are some attempts to include egalitarian domestic activities, as well as advertisements that focus solely on the product without depicting any characters, offering an alternative to deconstruct the messages that perpetuate inequalities between women and men.

Keywords-- Women, advertising, television, symbolic violence.

Abstract-- Advertising messages are an omnipresent part of daily life, conveying symbolic meanings that influence human behavior. Within advertising, relationships of dominance and inequality are reproduced, exerting power both directly and unconsciously, often with the implicit consent of the audience. This phenomenon is known as symbolic violence, which has historically been directed toward women. Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze its manifestations. To this end, an analysis of advertising content was conducted on the two main free-to-air television channels in Mexico.

The findings show that women had a greater presence in advertising content (66%) compared to men (34%). Among the main manifestations of symbolic violence, the role of women as caregivers stands out. Likewise, gender stereotypes associated with beauty are evident, such as youth (53.8% of characters were between 20 and 30 years old), skin tone (60% light to medium-light skin), and body type (88% slim body type).

Furthermore, visual objectification is strongly present through the focus on erogenous body parts and revealing clothing. Finally, some attempts to include egalitarian domestic activities were observed, as well as advertisements focusing solely on the product without representing any characters, which represents an alternative approach to deconstructing messages that reproduce inequalities between women and men.

Keywords: Women in advertising, television, symbolic violence.

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of life, human beings are surrounded by a multitude of messages presented in various forms; these messages shape our perceptions, values, and behaviors. The way these messages are conveyed has evolved with the advent of the media, particularly through advertising. In the words of Bringas López (2010), “the media, including advertising, are powerful agents of socialization that transmit the codes of conduct and social models of dominant groups.”

Relationships of domination are embedded within advertising messages, though in a way that is invisible to the victims; they are exercised through a certain form of violence that manifests itself purely in symbols of communication and knowledge through their recognition, where privileges, injustices, and abuses may seem acceptable and natural—what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has termed “symbolic violence.” More specifically, this sociologist defines it as “violence surrounding mental structures, cultural categories, stereotypes, roles, and social prejudices that dominant subjects impose in an invisible, subtle, and consensual manner on dominated groups, based on a given cultural arbitrariness that is effectively internalized in the concept of habitus.” (Bourdieu, 2000).

Today, this symbolic violence is perpetuated in advertising messages that reflect and reinforce the patriarchal system in which our society is immersed. These messages perpetuate gender stereotypes and roles that primarily subordinate women; they also visually objectify women by using them as mere objects of desire and advertising. This objectification manifests itself through the display of body parts rather than the depiction of a whole person, or through revealing clothing (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2022).

Thus, the constant portrayal of women in this way continues to perpetuate inequalities and reinforce the patriarchal system. According to Radl (1993), the wide variety of studies on women in the media repeatedly conclude that traditional stereotypes about the female role persist. It is therefore necessary to address these manifestations that occur through mass media such as television; in the case of Mexico, this medium remains one of the primary perpetrators of this type of violence. Unfortunately, there are myths that view symbolic violence as something spiritual with no real-world repercussions, downplaying it in comparison to other forms of violence such as physical or sexual violence (Bourdieu, 2000). This is entirely erroneous, since, as a form of violence that is internalized by individuals and accepted as part of the social order, it allows other forms of violence—such as physical, psychological, and sexual violence—to be perpetuated. Consequently, it creates an environment conducive to their emergence and justification, and thus could be considered the root of all forms of violence.

A clear example of the consequences of this violence can be seen in the body, through eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia caused by stereotypes of thinness, anxiety, self-esteem issues, and the aesthetic dehumanization of the body through surgery—particularly among women, for whom standards of the “perfect body” have been established (Herbon, 2016). Studies such as that by Toldos (2013) demonstrate that advertising messages portray women as not only skilled in domestic tasks but also as maintaining a perfect body and impeccable physical appearance, while men typically project a consistent image of competence and professional knowledge. Similar studies, such as those by Amaya and Amaya (2014) and UNICEF (2022) highlight the persistence of gender stereotypes in advertising in both Venezuela and Mexico, where women are portrayed passively and as susceptible to objectification; the traditional role of women in caring for children and the home is emphasized, while physically, a perfect appearance is highlighted, with beauty standards such as fair skin and slim bodies. On the other hand, García and Martínez (2009) note that women in advertisements become decorative objects of advertising; this assertion is further confirmed by Martínez, L. M. (2020), noting that women are merely advertising gimmicks through objectification, which contributes to the reproduction of other forms of violence, such as physical and sexual violence. As for Gómez (2015), he argues that the female body tends to be reduced to a sexual object, stripping it of its dignity, moral and ethical values, and dismissing its intellectual capacity.

Consequently, the objective of this study is to identify instances of symbolic violence by analyzing advertising content broadcast on the two free-to-air television channels with the largest viewership in Mexico, where this type of violence is perpetuated through gender stereotypes, the objectification of women, and the limited portrayal of women in traditional roles such as homemaking and childcare.

This analysis is based on 50 advertisements randomly selected from the two channels with the largest audiences reported in 2023 by the Federal Telecommunications Institute, using content analysis methodology, which seeks to understand the data not as a set of physical events, but as symbolic signifiers (Krippendorff, 1990).

This methodology is one of the most widely used for interpreting explicit, implicit, and even covert messages found in various mass media (Cabero, 1998). It generally consists of four main steps: the first involves pre-analysis, in which the population is identified and a sample is drawn from it; in this case, for the present study, this sample is a convenience sample; the second step involves categorization, in which the variables to be studied are established based on research conducted by other authors; the third step involves coding; and finally, analysis and interpretation (Amaya & Amaya, 2014).

An analysis of the data collected is also conducted, along with the identification of certain shifts in messaging that can serve as a guide for combating the perpetuation of this symbolic violence. It is worth noting that recognizing the importance of making symbolic violence visible in advertising is based on understanding its influence on society and the urgency of addressing it to promote gender equality and prevent the continuation of unequal power dynamics and discriminatory practices; Furthermore, it is crucial to address symbolic violence in advertising through concrete strategies and measures aimed at a fairer and more respectful representation of women, such as the inclusion of self-regulatory standards in the advertising industry, the implementation of gender-inclusive policies, and collaboration among various stakeholders to create advertising campaigns that do not perpetuate gender stereotypes or any form of symbolic violence.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through content analysis; therefore, the stages established in the work of Amaya and Amaya (2014) were used as a reference.

Preliminary Analysis: In this stage, the population was examined and the sample was selected. In the case at hand, the population consists of all television commercials aired on free-to-air television in Mexico. As for the selected sample, we chose the two channels with the highest viewership in 2023, according to reports from the Federal Telecommunications Institute (IFT), which are Canal de las Estrellas and Canal 5. The commercials were selected at random during the time slots with the highest viewership, as reported by the same institution.

Categorization: This step involved defining the categories or study variables used to analyze and interpret the message's imagery. For this research, the following categories were established.

- 1) Physical characteristics: subcategories: variation in skin tone, youth (age groups), body type.
- 2) Degree to which the product is targeted at women, subcategories: low, medium, high.
- 3) Role of family members: Son, Daughter, Father or mother, Grandmother or grandfather, other family member, not shown in a family setting.
- 4) Domestic setting: shown at home, parenting, performing household chores.
- 5) Objectification of women; visual objectification and revealing clothing.
- 6) Disabilities: Characters without a disability, characters with a disability.
- 7) Gender and sexual orientation: Characters who are not LGBTQIA+ and LGBTQIA+ characters.

Coding: Coding is the process by which information is organized and sorted, converting the various characteristics of the message into units that facilitate its understanding and analysis. During this phase, a table was created containing codes related to the categories and subcategories within each of the commercials.

Analysis and interpretation: This phase involves reviewing and understanding the results obtained by identifying each of the categories and subcategories, as well as comparing them with reality.

In summary, the applied methodology allows for the structuring of data in a valid and rigorous manner, enabling a reliable content analysis process; each of the categories and subcategories allows for systematic coding in an orderly fashion, which facilitates the interpretation of the advertisements.

advertisements; thus, based on the application of this methodology, the following section presents the results obtained for the advertisements with the largest viewership on free-to-air television in Mexico.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

According to the analysis of the 50 commercials, it was found that, of the total number of people featured in them, 66% are female and 34% are male (see Figure 1). Thus, women are represented far more than men, which may be linked to the idea that women are reduced to objects of desire or mere decoration based on their physical appearance.

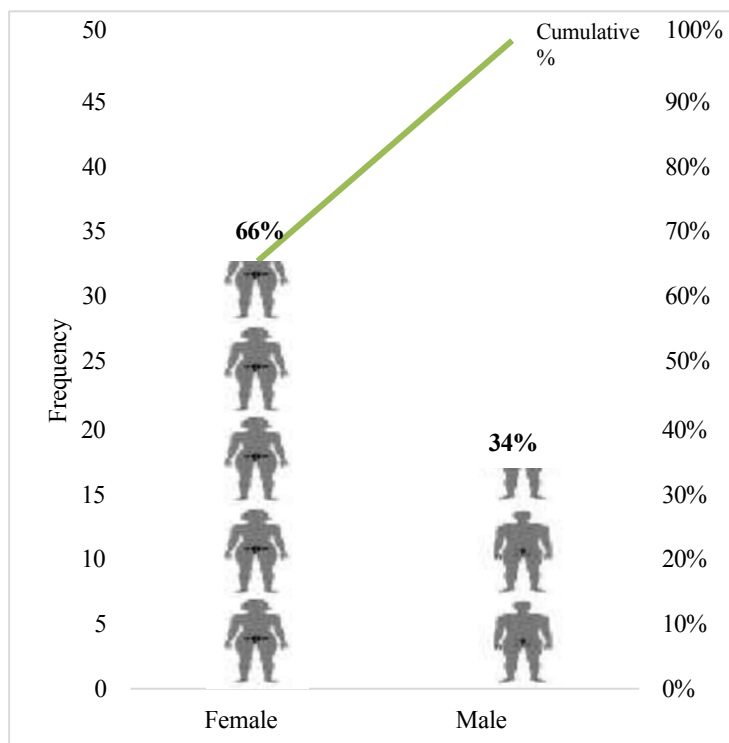


Figure 1. Percentage of female and male representation in commercials.

Source: Author's own work (2023).

In terms of sectors, there is a greater presence of women in those related to clothing, personal care, beauty, and appearance, representing 85% of the total in that sector. In the home care, decoration, and appliances sector, women represent 75%, and in food and beverages, 64.71%. These data reinforce the idea that women belong in the home and are responsible for caring for the family, as well as being linked to beauty stereotypes.

In the domestic sphere, it is observed that 69% of commercials do not take place in a home, while 22.5% do. Among the latter, 51.7% of commercials feature

women and 44.8% by men. In 6.2% of the commercials, people are shown performing household chores, with men and women represented equally at 50% each. On the other hand, only 2.3% of the commercials feature parenting scenes, with 66.7% assigned to women and 33.3% to men. This demonstrates a shift in traditional roles regarding domestic chores; however, when it comes to parenting, female participation still prevails. Returning to the parenting commercials, it is worth noting that the role assigned to men is given less screen time than that of women and is generally placed at the end of the commercial. Likewise, in commercials depicting family dynamics, 17% of women are portrayed in maternal roles, while 25% assume the role of daughters; in the case of men, 4% are represented as fathers and as grandfathers.

These findings are closely related to the results of the study conducted by Amaya and Amaya (2014) on advertising messages in Venezuela, which highlights a context of activities centered on specific roles such as housewife, schoolteacher, and office worker—roles that reinforce images portraying women as responsible for all domestic tasks and for the care of children, as well as their school-related activities. When comparing these two sets of results—and considering that they come from different national contexts—they share similar symbolic patterns stemming from their shared cultural, social, and media roots. This comparison allows for a broader interpretive framework of this violence, especially in countries like Mexico where there is limited research on symbolic violence in advertising.

On the other hand, regarding stereotypes associated with physical appearance, the analysis of the content reveals that 60% of the individuals have a skin tone ranging from light to medium, while 32.6% have a medium skin tone, and only 7.4% have a skin color ranging from medium-dark to dark. These data contrast with the context in Mexico, where studies conducted by El Colegio de México (n.d.) indicate that 67% of people aged 25 to 64 classify themselves as having medium skin tones. Similarly, the National Survey on Discrimination (ENADIS) reveals that around 36% of the Mexican population has a light brown skin tone, while between 30% and 36% classify themselves as having medium skin tones (National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 2022).

Regarding stereotypes related to body type, 88% of commercials feature individuals with slim bodies, with a 69% predominance of female representations, on the other hand

On the other hand, only 12% have an average body type, and of this percentage, 62.5% are men and 36.5% are women. These data reveal a significant disparity, showing that men are allowed to have less slender bodies compared to the expectations imposed on women. Contrasting these data with the reality in Mexico, according to the National Health and Nutrition Survey (INEGI, 2018), reveals that among adults aged 20 and older, 75.2% have weight issues, with 39.1% being overweight and 36.1% obese. These figures speak to the reality of Mexicans, where there is no predominance of slim bodies compared to what advertising depicts.

Another important aspect of stereotypes relates to youth, which has been internalized as an attribute associated with beauty in contemporary culture—a notion reinforced by phrases such as “You’re young, you’re pretty, but if you’re old, you’re ugly.” This trend is reflected in commercials, where 53.8% of the characters featured are between 20 and 30 years old, followed by 17.7% in the 31–40 age range, and 14.6% in the 41–60 age group; other age groups are represented in smaller numbers. These results demonstrate a prevalence of youth in media representation. It is also worth noting that advertising reinforces this idea by promoting skincare products aimed at reducing the visible signs of aging.

Regarding sexual orientation, it is observed that 99% of the characters in commercials represent heterosexual individuals, reflecting the predominance of the majority sexual orientation and suggesting a lack of inclusion and representation for those with different sexual orientations. This trend points to a social environment that privileges and normalizes heterosexuality, imposing specific characteristics considered inherent to traditional gender roles for both men and women. Regarding disabilities, there is no record that includes people with these characteristics. The findings align with research conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund (2022) regarding sexual orientation, which showed that less than 2% identified as LGBTQIA, while less than 1% had a disability.

With regard to visual objectification, it is observed that 38% of women are shown with the camera focused on specific body parts, such as the face, legs, shoulders, and arms, as well as in half-body shots, compared to 13% of men. Furthermore, it is evident that 56% of the

The people depicted wear revealing clothing; women account for 91% of these, while men account for only 9%. This highlights the portrayal of women in advertising as mere objects of desire and sensuality, disregarding their intellectual abilities or other attributes unrelated to the body. It is worth noting that the sector categorized as clothing, personal care, beauty, and appearance accounts for 50% of visual objectification and also includes 40% of the characters wearing revealing clothing; thus, these types of commercials rely on beauty stereotypes to sell their products. Similarly, the results obtained correspond with the findings reported in a study conducted in Colombia by Martínez (2021), which states that in advertising, the female body serves as a showcase to attract attention, presented with beauty and eroticism that functions as an object of sexual attraction and desire, without attributing intellectual capabilities to women, and is directed at the group holding power. Under the patriarchal system, the objectification of the body associated with beauty establishes stereotypical models of how a woman should be.

The results show that instances of symbolic violence persist in advertising messages, although there are also commercials in which the focus is exclusively on the products, without showing any people—accounting for 12% of the sample. Additionally, men are depicted in roles traditionally assigned to women, such as caregiving, child-rearing, and household chores, which constitute 8% of the sample. Although their presence is relatively minor, it is a step toward deconstructing these types of manifestations.

When comparing these findings with various studies of advertising analysis conducted in countries with similar cultural and social contexts, similar symbolic patterns are identified in the manifestations of symbolic violence. However, it is noteworthy that none of these studies observed the presence of emerging changes such as those shown in this analysis, particularly the exclusive focus on the product without human representation and the inclusion of men in domestic roles traditionally associated with women, even if these instances remain limited. These findings suggest an emerging transition in advertising discourses that, although still limited, opens possibilities for future transformations in the symbolic construction of Latin American advertising. **CONCLUSIONS**

The messages in commercials aired on Mexico's most-watched free-to-air television channels (Canal de las Estrellas and Canal 5) convey symbolic violence through stereotypes related to youth and beauty, with a predominance of young, fair-skinned women. Although there is

minimal change with the inclusion of characters with darker skin in smaller percentages, the fair-skinned standard persists. Regarding body type, thinness continues to be associated primarily with beauty, especially in women, and they continue to be portrayed as objects of sexual desire, with a focus on specific body parts—particularly erogenous zones such as shoulders, bust, legs, and lips.

When it comes to traditional roles, women continue to be primarily responsible for child-rearing and household duties. However, this research highlights some efforts to include both men and women in these contexts, which represents a significant step toward deconstructing manifestations of violence in the media. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that some commercials choose to use the product as the main focus of the advertising message, without including people, which can be an effective alternative to reducing symbolic messages that perpetuate gender inequalities. Although there is still a long way to go, it is necessary to recognize that small changes are being made in advertising messages that can contribute to the elimination of these manifestations of violence. However, regulations that govern or eliminate this type of symbolic messaging are limited in the case of Mexico. A relevant alternative worth revisiting to reduce messages that reinforce gender inequalities is femvertising, which seeks to empower women and counter patriarchal paradigms by positioning women as advocates for equality and empowerment (Carrillo, 2007).

Examining symbolic violence in advertising messages broadcast on broadcast television is crucial in the fight against discrimination and gender inequality. These studies remind us that advertising is not only a sales tool, but also a reflection of and a driver of cultural and social norms. The visibility of gender stereotypes in commercials provides an opportunity to question and challenge these limited and harmful representations.

Symbolic violence, although concealed through images, phrases, symbols, etc., has internalized repercussions on how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with the world around us. By normalizing the objectification of women, the idealization of certain types of beauty, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, unequal power structures are reinforced and social injustices are perpetuated. By highlighting these manifestations of violence in television advertising, we raise awareness about the need for equitable and respectful representation in the media. These works invite us to reflect on how we can work

Together, we can build a more inclusive and just society, where everyone can be seen and valued for who they are, beyond the gender stereotypes imposed by advertising and culture.

FUTURE WORK

This research aims to serve as a catalyst for further studies that bring symbolic violence to the forefront across various possible spheres, along with its potential effects, with the goal of incorporating these findings into Mexican regulations and creating mechanisms to eliminate such manifestations. For this reason, several future lines of research are suggested below.

With regard to advertising content, this serves as a starting point in the media, opening up new avenues for exploring other areas, such as analyzing symbolic violence in digital publications and social media, given the rise of digital marketing among younger generations, which relies on algorithms that segment the population and deliver more personalized advertising—a trend that may pave the way for new forms of domination that are more subtle and harder to identify than those seen on broadcast television. Likewise, it is pertinent to investigate the relationship between symbolic violence and social class, due to the aspirational messages that legitimize specific models of success and lifestyles, thereby reinforcing socioeconomic distinctions. Another relevant line of inquiry is the representation of ethnic and racial groups in Mexican advertising, through an analysis of the absence or presence of Indigenous groups, African Americans, and other cultural minorities, with the aim of highlighting the symbolic subordination or invisibility of these groups. Finally, a strategic line of inquiry consists of examining the regulatory framework in Mexico, including laws, regulations, and guidelines issued by regulatory bodies such as the Federal Telecommunications Institute and the agencies responsible for supervising advertising content, with the aim of identifying regulatory gaps regarding the prevention of stereotypical, discriminatory, or exclusionary representations, and, based on these analyses, to justify the need to explicitly recognize symbolic violence in Mexican legislation so that it can lead to new public policies

Taken together, these future lines of research broaden the scope of this type of study, thereby contributing to critical reflection and the reorientation of efforts to eradicate gender inequalities, as well as the creation of new resources to support these efforts.

REFERENCES

- Amaya, R. and Amaya, Z. (2014). *Katharsis*. Institución Universitaria de Evigado. (18), 11-15.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Male Domination* (J. Jordá, Trans.). Barcelona, Spain: Anagrama.
- Brigas, L. A. (2010). Dark Objects of Desire: Cultural Constructions of the Black Female Body in Advertising Discourse. In M. Lucas (Ed.), *Invisible Violences: Feminist Interventions Against Patriarchal Violence* (pp. 115-128).
- Cabero, J. (1998). *How Do Others See Us? The Image of the Teacher and Teaching in the Mass Media*. Seville, Spain: University of Seville.
- Carrillo, O. E. (2007). *Femvertising: Advertising with an Empowerment Focus*. Retrieved from <https://investigacion.fca.unam.mx/docs/memorias/2016/10.03.pdf>
- El Colegio de México. (n.d.). *Life and Skin Color*. Retrieved from <https://colordepiel.colmex.mx/vida/>
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2022). *Review of Advertising in Mexico, its relationship to gender equity, gender norms, and violence against women and girls*.
- García, N., & Martínez, L. (2009). A clear case of "virtucoolness: P". Conducting discussion groups in online communities. *Observatorio (OBS*) Journal*, 8, 260-274.
- Gómez, P. M. (2015). Violence against women in advertising. *Questiones Publicitarias*, 1(20), 58-72.
- Herbon, M. (2016). *Consequences of symbolic violence on the body*. Retrieved from <https://miriamherbon.com/consecuencias-violencia-simbolica-cuerpos/>
- National Institute of Statistics and Geography. (2018). *National Health and Nutrition Survey (ENSANUT) 2018*.
- National Institute of Statistics and Geography. (2022). *National Survey on Discrimination (ENADIS)*.
- Krippendorff, K. (1990). *Content Analysis Methodology: Theory and Practice* (L. Wolfson, Trans.). Barcelona, Spain: Paidós.
- Martínez, L. M. (2020). Symbolic violence against women in advertisements: A critical visual analysis. *Íkala, Journal of Language and Culture*, 26(2), 349-364. <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.v26n2a06>
- Radl, R. (2011). Media and violence against women: Elements of symbolic violence in television. *Latin American Journal of Sociology*, 1, 156-181.

Toldos, M. (2013). *Male victims and female aggressors: The hidden face of gender-based violence.*

Spain: Cántico.

COLLABORATIVE WORK TABLE

Role	Author(s)
Conceptualization	Gloria Sandoval Méndez, Regina Cruz Jiménez,
Methodology	Regina Cruz Jiménez, José Elías Mijares Díaz de León
Validation	Regina Cruz Jiménez, Enrique de Jesús Mohedano Torres
Formal Analysis	Gloria Sandoval Méndez, Regina Cruz Jiménez
Research	Enrique de Jesús Mohedano Torres, Maribel López Espinosa
Resources	Gloria Sandoval Méndez, Regina Cruz Jiménez, Enrique de Jesús Mohedano Torres Enrique de Jesús,
Collection and analysis of commercials	Mijares Díaz de León José Elías, Maribel López Espinosa
Writing - Preparation of the original draft	Gloria Sandoval Méndez, Regina Cruz Jiménez, Mohedano Enrique de Jesús Torres
Writing - Review and editing	José Elías Mijares Díaz de León, Maribel López Espinosa
View	Gloria Sandoval Méndez, Regina Cruz Jiménez, Enrique de Jesús Mohedano Torres, José Elías Mijares Díaz de León, Maribel López Espinosa
Supervision	Gloria Sandoval Méndez, Regina Cruz Jiménez
Project Management	Enrique de Jesús Mohedano Torres, Maribel López Espinosa
Fundraising	Mijares Díaz de León José Elías, Maribel López Espinosa

