

Contribution to *The Encyclopaedia of Consumer Culture*

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Gender Advertising

Introduction

Gender and advertising focuses on the way in which women, and more recently men, are represented in paid-for commercial messages designed to encourage consumers to purchase the product being promoted. In the Anglo-American world, the topic has been viewed as important in respect of morality since the end of the nineteenth century when some advertisers were accused of using images of scantily clad women to sell unrelated products. From the 1960s an additional concern was the way in which restricting the image of women in advertising to that of sex-object or housewife limited the aspirations of women by presenting them with a limited range of roles with which to identify. More recently concerns over the representation of women have been joined by concerns over the representation of men.

The Representation of Women

The earliest forceful critique of the advertising industry as contributing in a major way to the oppression of women came from Betty Friedan who in the early 1960s set out to investigate what she called “the problem that has no name”, the ennui pervading the lives of many American women in the wake of the Second World War. For Friedan one of the main causes of this dissatisfaction was advertising which, instead of showing women how new labour-saving devices (or even pre-made pie mix) could give them the free time to become astronomers or astronauts offered them only the possibility of being better wives and mothers. This critique provided the backbone of feminist attacks on advertising throughout the 1960s and 1970s when women were fighting for the right to access jobs that had been the traditional preserve of men, and seeking equal pay for equal work.

Two further influential critiques of the representation of women in advertising were published in the late 1970s. Erving Goffman used content analysis to demonstrate that the problem was not only sex-role stereotyping, but the way in which the composition of ads (for example the relative size of male and female figures and their relationship to one another) presented women in terms of deference and subordination, and in a manner he described as ‘childlike’. Judith Williamson turned to semiotics (a technique used to decode the meaning of ads), allied to psychoanalysis, structural linguistics and Marxism, to uncover what she saw as the ‘root meaning’ of a number of ads – concluding once again that ads presented women as limited to the roles of either sex-object or domestic drudge. This work was considered important, as research, for example that carried out in the United Kingdom in 1990 by the Advertising Standards Authority, indicated (as both Friedan and Williamson had argued) that advertising played an important role in establishing unrealistic views of the way women should look and behave.

In recent years the once-powerful second wave critique has been replaced by a renewed focus on gender difference, popularised by John Gray in a series of books under the generic title *Mars and Venus*. This focus has been supplemented by a widely held belief that most (if not all) of the goals of feminism have been achieved, and that women now live in a 'post-feminist' era in which feminism (although rarely going by that name) and femininity are no longer incompatible. In terms of gender and advertising this has disarmed the critique of advertising that uses highly sexualised images of women – alleging that such images are now produced with a knowing edge, with women exploiting their own sexual power rather than being exploited. Perhaps the best-known example of this type of advertising is the Wonderbra campaign that ran in the mid-1990s. The most famous of these showed the model Eva Herzigova in a black lacy underwear looking down at her bra-enhanced cleavage alongside text that read, in huge capital letters 'HELLO BOYS!'. Numerous critics have claimed that what made this ad (and others in the same series) different from what had gone before was the multiple ways in which the ad could be read by the viewer. In particular they argued that the ads convey the possibility that it is up to women to choose to become sexually desirable, thus shifting the location of power from the bearer to the object of the look.

Since the 1990s the world of advertising has showcased a much broader range of roles for women. Rosalind Gill has argued that the traditional image of 'wife-mother-housewife' is being replaced by images of sexually assertive, confident and ambitious women who exert their 'freedom' through consumption. Certainly it is no longer unusual to see women represented in advertising as occupying a range of powerful roles in public life. Indeed, it could be argued that whereas, in the past, women's role in public life was underplayed, the world of advertising now showcases a post-feminist utopia in which women have rather more power and influence (for example in the boardroom) than can be supported by a consideration of the evidence.

The Representation of Men

Towards the end of the twentieth century the emergence of masculinity studies resulted in a focus on the changing representation of men in advertising. In 1985 a 1950's themed ad for Levi Jeans known as 'Launderette', featured Nick Kamen stripping down to his boxer shorts to the strains of Marvin Gaye's 'I heard it through the grapevine'. This ad is regarded widely as emblematic of a new focus on the male body as a site of erotic contemplation – men no longer just looked, they were also to be looked at. Advertising still used sex to sell – but there was growing gender equality in that men, as well as women, were now being presented as sex objects. Indeed, by the early 1990s some critics were claiming that the new stereotype was that of 'girls on top', and that men were now the target of advertising's humour.

One of the many ads cited as evidence of this trend was an ad for Coca-Cola known as '11 o'clock appointment' which showed various female office

workers and executives awaiting the appearance of the 'body beautiful' – a handsome young labourer, without a shirt, drinking his can of Diet Coke. Yet other critics have given a more complex reading of this ad – noting that the class and power dynamics contained within the ad are not straightforward, with the man's lack of awareness of being looked at, and the overall comic tone of the ad, undermining the possibility that this man is being portrayed as a sex object in the same way that women have been traditionally portrayed. Whatever reading is adopted it is clear that the increased sexualization of the male body in advertising has not been at the expense of the objectification of women. The best that can be said is that both men and women are now equally subject to objectification.

Future Directions

The belief that sexual objectification can be seen as a positive choice has disarmed much of the traditional critique surrounding gender and advertising. Yet there remains concern that the bodies being objectified are those of young, slim, toned (and predominantly White) individuals. As a counter to this some brands have begun to focus on 'real' bodies. Nike's 'Get Real' campaign and Dove's 'Real Women' have sought to appeal to women by using a broader range of models, but it remains to be seen whether this trend will continue.

As the range of representations of women has grown, so too has the range of representations of men. Studies following on from the work of Goffman indicated that men were also subject to sex-role stereotyping. Today it is not unusual to see men represented as caring partners and loving fathers as well – but it remains the case that men are rarely seen as responsible for tasks associated with day-to-day household maintenance such as cooking, cleaning and shopping. If it is the case that gender representation in advertising contributes to expectations of appropriate gender behaviour then this should remain a cause of concern.

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