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Selling Gender Identity: Gender Role Portrayals in Contemporary Magazine Advertisements

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Selling Gender: Gender Role Portrayals in Contemporary Magazine Advertisements

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This study presents a content analysis of gender role portrayals and male and female objectification in contemporary magazine advertisements. A total of fifteen magazines were analyzed from a two month period to determine if gender role portrayals have changed or remained the same as earlier studies. The first analysis looks at product categories most and least often advertised by male or female models. The second analysis looks at the sexual portrayals in magazine advertisements and the rate of objectification of male and female models.

The advertising industry generates more than \$180 billion a year. It has been estimated that most people, on average, see 3,000 advertisements each day (Kilbourne, 2000). Advertising surrounds us on television, billboards, magazines, newspapers, and buses. Advertising images can be found in nearly every direction we turn. According to Kilbourne with the media “containing so many images of women and men, and messages about men and women and sexuality today, it is highly unlikely that these ideas would have no impact on our sense of identity” (Kilbourne, 2000).

There are more than just products being sold. Advertising also sells “values, love, sexuality, romance, success, and normalcy; advertising tells us who we are and who we should be” (Kilbourne, 2000). It is understandable that critics of advertising argue that (a) advertisements are deeply woven in the fabric of American culture, drawing on and redirecting

commonly held perceptions and beliefs; and (b) advertisements have a major role in both shaping and mirroring society (Mastin, Coe, Hamilton, & Tarr, 2004).

Advertisements shape society by using stereotypical images to establish shared experiences among consumers, and advertisements mirror society by promoting stereotypes, biases, and the dominant values of a patriarchal society (Mastin, Coe, Hamilton & Tarr, 2004; Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1995). The images found in advertising are often absorbed into people's learned expectations of individuals, comprising various groups, and therefore have the ability to sway individual's perceptions of and interactions with others. Advertising images have the ability to reflect, reinforce, and perpetuate sexist and racist attitudes, opinions, and behaviors already engrained within a given society (Mastin, Coe, Hamilton, & Tarr, 2004).

This study focuses on advertising found in contemporary magazines and the analysis of these advertisements is two-fold. First, I analyze how the advertisements in the magazines reflect stereotypical gender roles based on the product being advertised and the presence of a male or female model in the ad. The results of this first analysis are then compared to earlier studies to see if gender stereotypes are being portrayed more or less in current print advertisements. Second, I analyze the level of dress and undress of the models in the ads to determine overt sexuality and objectification in advertising. The results of this analysis are then compared to an earlier study that compares advertisements from 1964 and 1984 to see if the levels of sexuality and objectification are more, less, or the same in current print advertisements.

Review of Literature

The most often quoted and referred to authority on the subject of gendered advertisements is the anthropologist Erving Goffman. Goffman's (1979) study of gender portrayals in magazine advertisements point toward the idea that advertisements are loaded with

messages about cultural norms and values. Goffman (1979) says “if gender is defined as the culturally established correlates of sex, then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (p. 1). Goffman goes on to explain that “expression in the main is not instinctive but socially learned and socially patterned...What the human nature of males and females really consists of is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures” (p. 7-8).

If, as Erving Goffman states, expression is socially learned, then we must assume that mass media plays a large part in the social construction of gender roles and the expression of gender. Advertisements are one means by which men and women are educated on the subject of the ideal masculine or feminine image. As Whipple and Courtney (1985) note, “an important question for the advertiser is „What model-product pairings will be most effective in creating favorable consumer attitudes” (p. 5). Advertisers’ choices of models for specific products are based mainly on established target audiences and instinct about the suitability of model-product matches. Whipple and Courtney (1985) write that, “often the result is stereotyped model-product pairings, such as portraying women with household products and men with automobiles” (p. 5).

The portrayal of gender in advertising has generated a lot of attention over the past few decades. Most of the research has focused primarily on the portrayal of women in advertising, but in recent years more focus has shifted toward the portrayal of men in advertising as well. Women are often presented as subordinate to men, are viewed as sex objects, or decorative objects (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Goffman, 1979; Kilbourne, 2000; Romaine, 1999; Gauntlett, 2002). Women are most likely to be seen as product users and less likely to be seen as the decision makers or authority figures (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Gauntlett, 2002; Romaine, 1999). Women are often portrayed as young and concerned with physical attractiveness (Artz,

Munger & Purdy, 1999; Barthel, 1988; Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Gauntlett, 2002; Sexton & Haberman, 1974)

Men are more likely to be portrayed as assertive, adventurous, active, and victorious (Barthel, 1988; Gauntlett, 2002; Lester, 1996). Men are more often shown in working roles or in outdoor settings than their female counterparts (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Gauntlett, 2002; Lester, 1996; Salzman, Matathia & O'Reilly, 2005). Men are more often portrayed as the decision makers, the demonstrators of products, and the purchaser of big-ticket items (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Gauntlett, 2002; Romaine, 1999).

The use of sex appeal in advertising is another concern. Richmond and Hartman (1982) write that, "Its pervasive use and misuse are constantly before us, and typically elicit strong criticism" (p. 52). Women have been used as sexual objects in advertising for decades, most often seen as mere parts and not as the whole, their bodies chopped into parts, packaged and sold (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Gauntlett, 2002; Kilbourne, 2000). But now it appears that men are gaining "equality" in the traditional female domain of sexual objectification, being seen more as sexually alluring and with more emphasis on being an object of desire (Dotson, 1999; Gauntlett, 2002; Salzman, Matathia & O'Reilly, 2005).

The preceding descriptions of how men and women are portrayed in advertising are quite important. The constant and stereotypical portrayals of men and women in advertising and the continued objectification of both can have a negative effect on both sexes in regard to their self-esteem, their gender identity, their aspirations, and their self-images.

Research Questions

RQ1: What product categories were advertised most and least often by female model(s) only?

RQ2: What product categories were advertised most and least often by male model(s) only?

RQ3: What product categories were advertised most and least often by male and female models?

RQ4: How have the percentage of ads with sexual content changed in recent years?

Method

A content analysis of print advertising in contemporary magazines was used to address the research questions. Three magazine categories were chosen: general interest; men's; and women's. Five magazines were chosen for each category: *GQ*, *Esquire*, *HFM*, *Maxim*, *Men's Journal* (men's category); *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Real Simple*, *Woman's Day* (women's category); *People*, *Newsmax*, *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly* (general interest category), for a total of fifteen magazines that were analyzed. All of the magazines are nationally known with high name recognition and are available on newsstands throughout the United States. No specialty interest or regional interest magazines were used. All of the magazines were from the same issue month, October, 2008.

Only advertisements that were one-half page and larger and containing at least one adult human model were analyzed. Advertisements containing drawings, cartoon, silhouettes, or other non-human representations of people, such as robots, were not used for this analysis. Advertisements containing only children were also eliminated. If children were present in an advertisement with an adult model, only the adult model was used for coding purposes. A total of 716 advertisements fitting these criteria were obtained for analysis. All of the advertisements obtained were analyzed twice for separate coding categories. The first analysis coded the

product being advertised by a particular model(s) to determine gender stereotypes. The second analysis coded the levels of dress and undress of the model(s) in the advertisement to determine levels of sexual objectification.

Coding

Sixteen product categories for the first analysis were established based on products that frequently appear in magazines and based on product categories used in prior research studies that examined product portrayal (Mastin, Coe, Hamilton & Tarr, 2002; Wiles, Wiles & Tjernlund, 1995). The 16 product categories, listed alphabetically, follow:

1. Alcoholic Beverages
2. Children Related
3. Cleaning Products (home/clothing)
4. Clothing
5. Drugs & Medicine
6. Entertainment
7. Fashion Accessories
8. Finance/Real Estate
9. Food & Beverage (non-alcoholic)
10. Furniture/Home Appliances
11. Personal Care/Beauty Products
12. Public Service/Institutional
13. Technology
14. Tobacco
15. Transportation
16. Travel/Leisure

Product categories were examined as a function of gender to determine if there were differences in the products women only, men only, and both women and men advertised most and least often in the magazines. Four product categories – finance/real estate, furniture/home appliances, technology, and transportation – were labeled as product purchase decisions

traditionally believed to be made by men based on the results of previous research (Mastin, Coe, Hamilton, Tarr, 2002).

For the second analysis, all advertisements containing adult human models were coded for the degree of dress/undress of the portrayed models using the categories demure, seductive, partially clad, and nude (Soley & Kurzbard, 1986). Demure dress is defined as typical dress, including tennis skirts and walking shorts. Seductive dress includes open blouses and shirts which expose chest areas; mini skirts; “short-shorts”; tight clothing which accentuates the figure or middle inseam of trousers; full-length lingerie, except where translucent; evening gowns which expose cleavage; “muscle shirts”; and hiked skirts, exposing thighs. Partially clad models are defined as wearing bathing suits; underapparel and three-quarter length or shorter lingerie, except where translucent; “close-ups,” where the shoulders of the models are bare; and photographs or illustrations of legs which include the thigh, but display no clothing. Nudity is defined as unclothed bodies, including silhouettes; the wearing of translucent underapparel or lingerie; “medium shots,” where the models display no clothing or have only a towel over their shoulders; and full shots where the model is unclad except for a towel (Soley & Kurzbard, 1986).

Results

For the first analysis relating to product portrayals a total of 716 ads half-page or larger and containing at least one human adult model were analyzed. The product category advertised most often was clothing with 205 ads, or 28.6% of the total advertisements coded, followed by personal care/beauty products with 192 ads, or 26.8% of the total ads coded. The four categories labeled as traditionally male had fairly low numbers of advertisements represented by adult models. Technology claimed 5% of the total ads coded while finance/real estate claimed 3.8%,

furniture/home appliances claimed 1.8%, and transportation, formerly quite a large number represented by models, claimed only .01% of the total ads coded.

The first research question pertained to what products were most and least often portrayed by female only model(s). For 8 of the 16 product categories, a larger percentage of advertisements printed in the magazines featured female model(s) only: cleaning products, drugs/medicine, personal care, finance/real estate, food/beverage (non-alcoholic), furniture/home appliances, public service/institutional, and technology. Categories labeled earlier as traditionally male, finance/real estate, furniture/home appliances, and technology, were found to feature more female model(s) in this study (see Table 1).

The second research question pertained to what products were most and least often portrayed by male only model(s). For 6 of the 16 product categories, a larger percentage of advertisements printed in the magazines featured male model(s) only: alcoholic beverages (which actually had the same percentage as male/female models together), clothing, fashion accessories, tobacco, transportation, and travel/leisure. Only one category labeled earlier as traditionally male, transportation, was actually found to have more male only model(s) in this study. Categories typically thought of as female, clothing and fashion accessories were found to feature more male model(s) in this study (see Table 1).

The third research question pertained to what products were most and least often portrayed by male and female models. For 2 of the 16 product categories, a larger percentage of advertisements printed in the magazines featured both male and female models together: Alcoholic beverages (which actually had the same percentage as male only model(s)), and entertainment (see Table 1).

Table 1 Product Categories as a Function of Gender

Product Category	Female model(s)	Male model(s)	Male & female models	N
Alcoholic Beverages	1 (.09%)	5 (45.4%)	5 (45.5%)	11 (1.5%)
Children Related	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Cleaning Products (home/clothing)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (.01%)
Clothing	35 (17.1%)	120 (58.5%)	50 (24.4%)	205 (28.6%)
Drugs & Medicine	33 (73.3%)	4 (.09%)	8 (17.7%)	45 (6.3%)
Entertainment	22 (31.9%)	22 (31.9%)	25 (36.2%)	69 (9.6%)
Fashion Accessories	5 (13.9%)	25 (69.4%)	6 (16.7%)	36 (5%)
Finance/Real Estate	11 (40.7%)	7 (25.9%)	9 (33.3%)	27 (3.8%)
Food & Beverage (non-alcoholic)	14 (51.8%)	11 (40.7%)	2 (.07%)	27 (3.8%)
Furniture/Home Appliances	8 (61.5%)	3 (23.1%)	2 (15.4%)	13 (1.8%)
Personal Care/Beauty Products	132 (69.8%)	38 (19.8%)	22 (11.5%)	192 (26.8%)
Public Service/Institutional	15 (53.6%)	3 (10.7%)	10 (35.7%)	28 (3.9%)
Technology	13 (36.1%)	12 (33.3%)	11 (30.6%)	36 (5%)
Tobacco	0 (0%)	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	3 (.004%)
Transportation	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	0 (0%)	4 (.01%)
Travel/Leisure	6 (37.5%)	8 (50%)	2 (12.5%)	16 (2.2%)
Gender Totals	299 (41.8%)	264 (36.9%)	153 (21.4%)	716 (100%)

Advertisements portraying suggestively clad, partially clad, and nude models were coded as containing sexually objectified model(s). Table 2 presents the degree of dress/undress of the models by gender. Of the advertisements appearing in the analyzed magazines, 716 contained adult models. Of the 716 ads, 298 portrayed by female only models, 264 portrayed by male models and 154 portrayed by male and female models together. Of the 298 advertisements featuring female models, 32 ads featured suggestively clad models which is 10.7% of the total ads, 41 ads featured partially clad models which is 13.8% of the total ads, and 9 ads featured nude models which is 3% of the total ads. Over all there were 82 ads, or 27.5% of the total ads, that portrayed female models in other than demure dress. Compared to the ads analyzed in 1964 where there were 47, or 41.6% of the total ads, and 1984 where there were 104 ads, or 40.8% of

the total ads with female models portrayed in other than demure dress, the percentage of female models shown as sexually objectified is lower in this study than both 1964 and 1984 advertisements (see Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4).

Of the 264 advertisements featuring male only models, 5 ads featured models that were suggestively clad which is 1.9% of the total ads, 19 ads featured models that were partially clad which is 7.2% of the total ads, and 6 ads featured nude male models equaling 2% of the total ads. Overall there were 30 ads, or 11.4% of the total ads, that portrayed male models in other than demure dress. Compared to the ads analyzed in 1964 where there were 5, or 3.7% of the total ads, and 1984 where there were 28 ads, or 15.3% of the total ads with male models portrayed in other than demure dress, the percentage of male models shown as sexually objectified is higher than the 1964 advertisements but lower than the 1984 advertisements that were analyzed (see Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4).

When males and females were portrayed together in the same advertisement, the female models were more frequently portrayed in various stages of undress than were the male models. Of the 154 advertisements that portrayed male and female models together, 21 (13.6%) depicted a sexually dressed or undressed female in the presence of a fully clothed male. Only one ad (.01%) showed a partially clad or nude male in the presence of fully-clothed female. However, ten ads (6.5%) did contain partially or suggestively clad males and females together. The percentage of advertisements showing both male and female models being sexually objectified is higher than the advertisements analyzed in 1964 which were 4.2%, but lower than those advertised in 1984 at 10.1% (see Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4).

Table 2 Degree of Dress/Undress by Sex of Models: 2008

	2008					
	Ads Portraying Males and Females Together (N=154)					Totals (N=716)
	Ads With Female Models Only (N=298)	Ads With Male Models Only (N=264)	"Sexual" Male in Presence of Demure Female	"Sexual" Female in Presence of Demure Male	"Sexual" Male and Female Present	
Suggestively Clad	32 (10.7%)	5 (1.9%)	16 (10.4%)	1 (.01%)	1 (.01%)	55 (7.7%)
Partially Clad	41 (13.8%)	19 (7.2%)	5 (3.2%)	0 (0%)	9 (5.8%)	74 (10.3%)
Nude	9 (3.0%)	6 (2.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	15 (.02%)
Total (Ads with non-demure models)	82 (27.5%)	30 (11.4%)	21 (13.6%)	1 (.01%)	10 (6.5%)	144 (20.1%)

Table 3 Degree of Dress/Undress by Sex of Models: 1984

	1984					
	Ads Portraying Males and Females Together (N=207)					Totals (N=645)
	Ads With Female Models Only (N=255)	Ads With Male Models Only (N=183)	"Sexual" Male in Presence of Demure Female	"Sexual" Female in Presence of Demure Male	"Sexual" Male and Female Present	
Suggestively Clad	33 (12.9%)	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.5%)	17 (8.2%)	0 (0%)	53 (8.2%)
Partially Clad	38 (14.9%)	15 (18.2%)	4 (1.9%)	17 (8.2%)	17 (8.2%)	91 (14.1%)
Nude	33 (12.9%)	11 (6.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (1.9%)	4 (1.9%)	52 (8.1%)
Total (Ads with non-demure models)	104 (40.8%)*	28 (15.3%)	5 (2.4%)	38 (18.4%)*	21 (10.1%)	196 (30.4%)

Table 4 Degree of Dress/Undress by Sex of Models: 1964

	1964					
			Ads Portraying Males and Females Together (N=119)			
	Ads With Female Models Only (N=113)	Ads With Male Models Only (N=135)	"Sexual" Male in Presence of Demure Female	"Sexual" Female in Presence of Demure Male	"Sexual" Male and Female Present	Totals (N=367)
Suggestively Clad	15 (13.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	23 (6.3%)
Partially Clad	20 (17.7%)	2 (1.5%)	0 (0%)	11 (9.2%)	4 (3.4%)	37 (10.1%)
Nude	12 (10.6%)	3 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	3 (2.5%)	1 (0.8%)	19 (5.2%)
Total (Ads with non-demure models)	47 (41.6%)*	5 (3.7%)	0 (0%)	22 (18.5%)*	5 (4.2%)	79 (21.5%)*

*Indicates that percentages contain 0.1% rounding error compared to column totals.

Discussion

The results of this study show that there are still gender stereotypes in product placement in print advertising but the levels of stereotyping was not as prevalent as in previous studies (Mastin, Coe, Hamilton & Tarr, 2002). Those areas that were traditionally seen as having female model(s) such as cleaning products or child related products have declined in the magazines that I analyzed. More men are being shown in formally traditional female product placement such as fashion accessories where previous studies found 5.6% of the ads had male only models for fashion accessory advertisements; my study found 69.4% of the ads had male only models.

I found that products typically portrayed by male or female models are now being advertised as stand-alone products in the advertisements with no human model present, or in

some cases, child models with the products. I found that traditionally gender stereotyped products such as cleaning products, child related products, and automobile advertisements had no model present in the ad at all thus eliminating the gender stereotype and rendering the advertisements gender neutral. I also found that the number of models representing traditional gendered products may have moved from the actual advertisements to the editorial content of the magazines. In this study I looked only at the print advertisements within the magazines, but further studies could be conducted including the entirety of the magazines since traditional gender role images and messages still exist within the editorial content of the magazines which should lead to further studies of the entire magazine as opposed to just the advertising portions.

Following up on sexual objectification of advertising models, I found that the number of female models shown at various levels of dress or undress has remained steady or in some cases lower than previous studies (Soley & Kurzbard, 1986), while the number of male models shown as sexually objectified has continued to increase through the years. It would seem that men are catching up in equality with women when it comes to sexual objectification and the use of their bodies as the major selling point for a product. Though the number of objectified female models in print advertising shows a slight decline in this study it is worth noting that objectified female models are appearing more in the content of the magazines. Although I did not find as many female models in states of undress in the advertisements themselves, I did notice a great number of female models that were presented in an objectified manner in the editorial portions of the magazines. A further study of the magazines in their entirety should be conducted to include all images present in the magazines.

Conclusion

Advertising is known to have great powers of persuasion. As Dotson (1999) notes, “the images and messages delivered from ads can and do alter the way we think and how we feel about other people” (p. 59). More importantly, advertising “has tremendous influence on the way we think and how we feel about ourselves” (p. 59). It is important to remember that advertisements sell more than just a product. Advertising sells us a lifestyle, ideals, sexuality, and normalcy. Advertising is part of the societal interaction that shapes our identities and gender roles.

It is easy to contrast what goes on in ads to what goes on in the real world and conclude as Goffman (1979) did that “advertisements present a dolled-up, affluent version of reality” (p. 22). Advertisements represent people’s desires and aspirations, not their realities. The problem lies in the fact that advertising only reflects certain aspects of a society’s aspirations (Courtney & Whipple, 1983). Like it or not, as Salzman, Mathia and O’Reilly (2005) note, “the media help to shape our sense of what’s normal, what’s possible, and what’s desirable” (p. 123) and we need to realize that the images we see and the content we read in advertisements may “keep us trapped in very rigid roles” (Kilbourne, 2000).

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Laura Pelletier received her undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree from Minnesota State University-Mankato in the department of Speech Communication, graduating Magna Cum Laude in December of 2008. She is currently working on her Master of Fine Arts-Forensics in the Speech Communication department at MSU-Mankato. In addition to working on her graduate degree, she is also a teaching assistant in the department teaching Fundamentals of Speech classes. Laura is a member of the speech honor society Lambda Pi Eta, Delta Phi Chapter, was the 2007-2008 Wolff Family Speech Communication scholarship recipient, and has been elected to the 2009 *Who's Who Among Students in American Universities & Colleges* in recognition of outstanding merit and accomplishment as a student at MSU-Mankato. She conducted this research as part of a senior project under the direction of Dr. Dan Cronn-Mills in the Speech Communication Department.