Feminine Representation in Beauty Advertising: the Paradox of Liberation

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The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the use of interpretive, image and language based analyses associated with postmodernist feminism. Postmodernist feminist analyses can provide insights into ways in which some advertisements reproduce and reinforce the male-female power hierarchy that disadvantages women relative to men. Such approaches can overcome some of the limitations of traditional liberal feminist content analytic approaches.

Since the early 1960's, feminists and other social critics have scrutinized advertisers' portrayals of women. In marketing and consumer behavior, most of the attention has centered on the lack of women in ads and/or their limited and one-dimensional portrayal as, for example, sex objects, happy housewives and mothers. Justified as these critiques are, they have overlooked some of the more subtle and therefore more serious problems with advertising, including visual images and symbols, language use and underlying themes and messages that privilege men over women.

In this research, we focus specifically on contemporary beauty advertising targeted at women. The analysis of symbolic and linguistic elements used in advertisements was based on ads from a variety of contemporary women's magazines from Vogue to Elle to Glamour to Good Housekeeping and Women's Day. We found a trend toward the adoption of male imagery and discourse to sell women's beauty products.

On the surface, it appears that advertisers now portray women as liberated and as having equal access to the same opportunities as do men. However, a closer analysis reveals a troubling paradox. That is, while the message in many beauty advertisements seems to reflect an ideology of liberation and quality, the implicit or explicit goal of such ads is to achieve certain beauty outcomes that are associated with traditional and ideal notions of femininity and femaleness. In other words, while these beauty ads may adopt a liberated, pro-feminist tone, they still present physical appearance and beauty, rather than intellectual and economic achievements, as the basis for judging a woman's worth.

The coexistence of feminist discourse and ideal representations of femininity underscores the binary opposition between the feminine and masculine in our society. Since ideal masculine characteristics (e.g., independent, dominant, aggressive, muscular, tough and powerful) are socially privileged over their binary opposite ideal feminine characteristics (e.g., dependent, submissive, passive, soft, delicate and beautiful) the quest to achieve such an end is inherently at odds with social progress for women. Hence the contradiction of liberation.

Our analysis identified four recurring themes in beauty ads which are associated with this paradox. First, beauty is transformed into a health issue through the use of scientific, medical and technical language and evidence. Although men have traditionally been the controllers and gatekeepers in the realm of science and medicine, such ads suggest that women now have access to the latest scientific and medical discoveries -- not to prevent breast cancer, heart disease, and reproductive problems -- but to achieve smoother, softer, younger looking skin or similar outcomes. Second, although traditional norms of femininity are at odds with aggression and war, women are called upon to join the revolution and fight the enemy -- their bodies -- which are out of control and in a state of rebellion. Third, beauty issues are elevated to the same level of importance as social/political issues such as the environment and reproductive choice. Fourth, feminism is equated with femininity through the use of pro-feminist rhetoric, such as freedom, liberation and independence, in conjunction with promises of achieving ideal feminine beauty outcomes. These themes will be illustrated with slides reproduced from recent beauty advertisements. The paper concludes with some thoughts on how, or whether, beauty products might be better marketed.