Contemporary Advertising Images of Men and Women: What Are They Selling Us?

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One of the earliest gender-related matters to attract the attention of consumer researchers concerned the manner in which sex roles, particularly stereotypical women's sex roles, were portrayed in advertising (e.g., Courtney and Lockertz, 1971; Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia, 1977; Venkatesan and Losco, 1980; Wagner and Banos, 1973). These articles varied in purpose and perspective, but their focus generally centered on women alone (for an exception see Skelly and Lundstrom, 1981), and on the degree to which a restricted range of somewhat outdated roles for and attitudes regarding women were portrayed. Courtney and Lockertz's conclusions regarding the portrayal of women in print advertisements in 1970 are typical. They found a preponderance of images suggesting that a woman's place is in the home, that women do not make important decisions nor do important things, that women are dependent and need the protection of men, and that women are sex-objects, not people.

Some of this research was motivated by an underlying assumption that advertising images were influential on the way people saw themselves and one another. The implicit or explicit concern was that such advertisements were socially irresponsible because they mis-represented women and suggested (to women and men) that the stereotypes listed above were true. Some advertisers responded in their own defense that the women in their target market identified with traditional role portrayals, and thus that they were not inhibiting social change (Heslop, Newman and Gauthier, 1989). By and large, however, many advertisers made at least superficial attempts to update the images they portrayed. Currently, we see many images in advertising of women working outside the home, making important decisions and doing important things, acting independently of men, and not merely seeming to be passive sex objects. Some contemporary advertisements targeted at "traditional" women certainly convey stereotypes just like those listed by Courtney and Lockertz, but many advertisements targeted at other markets seem to present the opposite image. Taken as a whole, then, it might be argued that advertising presents a much broader range of images of women than it did two decades ago, and that concern about the effect of advertising images should be muted. In other words, there is no longer need to be concerned about the impact of advertising since it no longer exclusively conveys outdated stereotypes of women's roles.

Such a view can readily be challenged if the focus of analysis is broadened beyond a critique of the traditional stereotypes of women's roles (e.g., Freedman, 1984; Lakoff and Scherr, 1984; Lasch, 1978; Schudson, 1984; Wolf, 1990). Richins (1991) recently took up this issue in her study of the impact of idealized images of physical beauty portrayed in advertising on her respondent's self images. She found evidence that exposure to advertising portraying idealized images of beauty was associated with lowered satisfaction with personal appearance among her subjects. Richins, however, studied only young women and was concerned exclusively with how images of unrealistically attractive female models affected their self perceptions.

This special session attempts to follow upon Richins' lead, and explore a wider range of advertising images with a view to understanding the effects these have on both women and men. The session begins with a paper by Bristor and Fontenelle which follows on Richins' paper by more finely analyzing the ways in which beauty advertising directed toward women convinces them that they can, and should strive to, attain the unrealistic images portrayed in the advertisements. It argues that despite the overtly pro-feminist message of such advertising, they work to perpetuate the notion that a woman's worth is defined by her degree of beauty. Fischer and Halpenny's paper takes a step toward understanding how advertising may affect men's self-images. It argues that beauty per se is not being sold to men, but that a range of seemingly attractive -- and unattainable -- ideals is
presented. It suggests that these images are understood by men, but that the relationship between their self-perceptions and these idealized images is more complex than that which Richins found for women. Gainer’s paper expands the debate by focusing on images of fat in advertising, arguing that advertising conveys a connection between fat and ugliness. She explores how the image of fat is subject to differing social constructions for men and women, but suggests that for both, a strong stigma is associated with fat.

The session should be of interest to all those who wish to see the debate of gender representations in advertising updates, broadened and refined. To ensure time for interchange between the presenters and the audience, no one has been formally designated as a discussant for the session.

REFERENCES


