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Advertising and Representations of Femininity

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The role of advertising as a creator and transmitter of meanings between people and objects has long been recognized by scholars both within and outside marketing (e.g. Ewen 1976; Hally 1990; Marcuse 1964; McCracken 1990; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1993; Sherry 1987; Stern 1993; Williamson 1978). Acknowledging the power of advertising as a cultural institution, several consumer behavior researchers increasingly called attention to its various social consequences (see, for example, Belk and Poilay 1985, Poilay 1986 on materialism; Leigh et al. 1987, Richins 1991, Slate and Weinberger 1980 on portrayals of women; and Wilkes and Valencia 1989 on representations of minorities).

One particular domain that has been a target of severe criticism is representations of women in advertising. Many writers with a feminist perspective criticized advertising on the basis of depicting women as either sex objects or happy housewives, incompetent and dependent on men (e.g. Berger 1972; Kaplan 1983; Williamson 1978; Winship 1980). This stream of research, which developed outside of consumer behavior, predominantly utilizes structural/semiotic techniques and aims to reveal the ideological construction of female identity within the advertising text in which the oppressive and patriarchal meanings are assumed to reside. Drawing on Althusserian notion of ideology (Althusser 1971), Sauserean semiology (Saussure 1966 [1915]) and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan 1968), these analyses conclude that advertisements are ideological representations that serve to maintain patriarchy by constructing femininity as nothing but appearance and creating subject positions in which women are invited to respond to themselves only through the imagined fetishes of men.

However, such formalistic and unidimensional effects of media on viewers has been challenged by a variety of movements in communication studies and contemporary literary theory. Reception analysis and reader-response theory, in particular, have explored various ways in which texts and readers work together to produce meaning (see Ang 1985, Morley 1993, Radway 1984, Schröder 1994 for reception analysis; and Culler 1975, Fish 1980, and Iser 1980 for reader-response theory). Within this approach it has been argued that meaning of any text is not fixed but emerges from the interaction between the text and the viewer. Although it is acknowledged that texts attempt to position viewers as particular subjects through particular modes of address and favor certain meanings over the others, media messages are regarded as inherently polysemic. That is, viewers are given the power to accept or neglect the preferred meanings of the text and subject positions it offers, play with the textual conventions and exploit the openness in the text, ultimately constructing different interpretations.
participates in the interpretive work open up a space for symbolic resistance through oppositional decoding and challenging of the dominant meaning of the text. Examining the potential of decoding media texts oppositionally, several studies argue that viewers can indeed read against the grain and resist the dominant meanings of even allegedly the most oppressive and escapist genres such as romance novels (Radway 1984), soap operas (Lovell 1981; Robinson 1983) and mainstream movies (Fiske 1989).

An active audience who works through the media text rather than passively taking its prescribed meaning bears important implications for advertising. Recently a number of scholars in consumer research utilized literary theory (Scott 1994a, 1994b; Stern 1989, 1993, 1994) and literary criticism and semiotics (McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Mick and Buhl 1992; Ritson and Elliot 1995) to advance an understanding of how audiences interpret advertisements. Paralleling the research on other media forms, this emerging advertising reception paradigm conceives advertisements as inherently polysemic. That is, consumers do not merely accept the persuasive information presented by the marketer in the advertisement but rather construct their own interpretations based on their personal objectives, cultural knowledge, advertising literacy and social locations. Thus within this framework the attention shifts from “what does advertising do to people?” to “what do people do with advertising?” (Lannon and Cooper 1983).

The question of what people do with advertising becomes an even more intricate and complicated one in the case of advertisements targeted towards women. Although the existential goal of advertising is to provide information about a product and motivate its purchase, through their power of choosing to include certain images and exclude others, advertisers have also the ability to construct and portray representations that reproduce the dominant power relations and gender ideologies. Today, even if the feminist critique and changes in the lifestyles of women have increasingly problematized the traditional representations of femininity, "sexuality," "beauty" and "attractiveness" continue to dominate most of the ads targeted toward women, along with the new ideologies of "free," "equal" and "economically powerful" new women. A substantial portion of the ads in the glossy pages of magazines still convey a femininity which is in line with the patriarchal definitions. Among these sexuality and physical attractiveness are the most prevalent ones, even in ads for mundane products such as laundry detergent, or for technologically sophisticated products such as cars, thus reproducing the illusion that feminine identity is primarily defined in sexual terms. While it is evident that not all women are offended by the use of overt female sexuality and the emphasis on physical appearance in advertising to sell almost anything, some women are. It is likely that women who are uncomfortable with the way female identity is depicted in advertisements will be more inclined to resist certain images. It may further be the case that opposition to certain images translate into a negative brand attitude, at least in some product categories (i.e., fashion items, cosmetics and perfume), where the physical appearance and body shape of the female model is closely related to the product. Hence, it appears that a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of resistance within the context of ads targeted toward women may both provide an additional insight to consumer behavior scholars in comprehending the advertisement-consumer interaction, and motivate advertisers to create more socially responsible and responsive advertisements.
Observing the overall lack of interest on this topic within consumer behavior literature to date (for an exception, see Stern [1993] on the notions of advertising as gendered texts and consumer responses as gendered readings), this paper aims to develop an account of resistance toward the dominant images of women in advertisements. Rather than favoring either total persuasion or total resistance arguments, the emphasis will be on the interplay between the marketer and consumer; that is, the dialectical relationship between the two that defines and redefines the cycle of persuasion and resistance. The analysis will proceed first by mapping the ideological construction of "woman" within the advertising text, second by examining the oppositional potential of alternative ways of reading, and third by tracking a new narrative that turns resistance itself into a new form of persuasion. It will be argued that feminist opposition to and rejection of images that are "repressive" to women eventually provide a new cultural source for the creative production of advertisers. Thus, resistance to the traditional representations of women can be absorbed and incorporated into the very structure of the advertisements. Although the methodological limitations of structural/semiotic reading of advertisements are acknowledged, at this stage only textual analyses of a number of exemplar ads will be carried out to demonstrate the arguments. It should be noted that no claims can be made about the way actual consumers will interpret these advertisements and, hence, the arguments presented here await future empirical validation.

IDEOLOGY OF FEMININITY IN ADVERTISING

The term ideology here is used to refer to those seemingly natural, universal and always true values, practices, ideas, representations that legitimate the interests of the dominant class, gender and race (Fraser 1989; Kellner 1995; McCormick and Waller 1987). Ideology works to make certain things appear as "common sense" and as "the way things are" while concealing their historically constructed and repressive nature. As Kellner argues by producing hierarchies through the separation of groups into dominant and subordinate, ideology is "part of a system of domination which serves to further oppression by legitimating forces and institutions that repress and oppress people" (1995:61). For example, through various ideological discourses women have been regarded as passive, domestic, emotional and belonging to the private sphere by their nature, whereas men are considered to be active, rational and part of the public realm. Media culture, including advertising, produces representations that naturalize dominant positions and shape individuals’ perceptions of reality and identity (see Stern [1993] for a detailed deconstruction of gender assumptions in advertising based on feminist literary criticism).

Williamson (1978), in an early and influential analysis of the ideological structure of advertising, regards advertisements as meaning structures that provide an arena in which meaning is not just "decoded" within one structure, but transferred to create another. Ads draw on meaning systems that are already known to the viewers from their outside cultural world. An underlying ideological structure permits advertisements to convert the already known meaning systems to new, hybrid meanings that suit the particular interests and purposes of advertisers. Advertisers can do this and viewers can decode because there are shared meaning systems and cultural codes and rules guiding the interpretation of ads which forms an "interchangeable system" of rules (Williamson 1978:13; see also McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994a, 1994b; Stern 1989). That is, when
looking at advertisements we are never just spectators who gaze at images of women as if they were fictitious characters set apart and differentiated from the real us. We are already acquainted with the images of women from other discourses and experience and live through the "real" woman in our daily lives. The signification of an ad gets actualized only in relation to this "outside" knowledge of femininity (Winship 1980).

Advertisements employ a set of organizational strategies to draw the viewer into their meanings. Ads often communicate with their viewers through the implied phrase "Hey, you!" (Williamson 1978). Seeing a potential "you" in the mirror of the ad the viewer is invited to perform a critical exchange of meaning. The "Hey, you" mode of address not only asks the viewer to insert herself into the already established position of the model but also to link that personality to the commodity that the advertisement is about. That is, first it provides a model that stands for the desired self of the viewer as she might be if "transformed by the product." (Berger 1972:134; Williamson 1978:60); second it prescribes "how we are/should be/can be a certain feminine woman, whose attributes in relation to men and the family derive from the use of commodities" (Winship 1980:218).

In addition to mode of address, advertisements set the subject and object positions in the text through directing the gaze. In her analysis of Hollywood movies, Mulvey (1981) argues that movies offer two kinds of pleasure: identification and voyeurism. In the former the spectator narcissistically identifies with an idealized figure on the screen while, in the latter, derives pleasure from the act of looking at itself. A similar argument can be made for advertisements: ads can simultaneously motivate the viewer to identify with the image and take a voyeur position.

Responding to the call of the advertisement implies recognizing certain social roles offered in the story of the ad, identifying with the actors and adopting a personality (Scott 1994b). In most of the advertisements a face stares back to the viewer with a gaze that merges with her own. The advertisement becomes the mirror which unites the model in the ad and the viewer, even though the two are spatially distant. This mirrored gaze rests on a tacit understanding that ads reflect the desired self. The desire becomes to own the appearance, to possess the look that is being offered (Goldman 1992). Evidence also suggests that in addition to identification, advertising images generate social comparison, at least in some instances, and women use the female models in the ads as a comparison standard for their own self perceptions (e.g. advertisements for beauty products; see Freedman 1984; Richins 1991).

Apart from a narcissistic pleasure deriving from identification with the model, many ads provide a voyeuristic position for the viewer. However, in doing so, the distinction between the subject and object of the gaze often blurs. While the male gaze is mostly absent in the advertisements aimed at women, creating the illusion that the viewer is asked to get pleasure from the image of her would-be self for her own consumption, the message implicitly assumes a male gaze and invites the women to respond themselves through the imagined fetishes of men. Kaplan argues that "the woman places herself as either passive recipient of male desire, or at one remove, positions herself as watching a woman who is passive recipient of male desires and sexual action" (1983:328, emphasis in the original). Thus, the attractive and sexy woman framed within the beautiful photograph of the ad becomes a representation potentially to be gazed by
men even if it is targeted to a female viewer.

Lastly, in many ads femininity is constructed through fragmentation of the female body. The almost magical fetisitization of eyes or lips in cosmetic ads may appear necessary for the visual semiotics of marketing products for these body parts, but such ads in fact separate and appropriate parts of the female body and then invite the viewer to buy them back in a transformed state (McCracken 1993; Williamson 1978). Fragmentation substitutes a part of woman’s body for the whole. Winship argues that “women are invited by the ads to respond to themselves through the imagined fetishes of men -- the tight/leggs, the lipstick/lips which fragments or distortion of them stand for all their womanness ” (1980:219). The constant reinforcement of fragmented ways of seeing the self teaches a reified consciousness in which lips, eyes, legs and other body parts fetishistically stand in for the whole woman which is further mediated by the commodity.

To illustrate the various strategies discussed above, two examples from the recent issues of one of the popular woman’s magazine, Vogue, have been chosen. The "hey, you" mode of address and the confusion of the subject and object of the gaze work simultaneously and skillfully to interpellate the viewer in the Wonderbra ad (Plate-1). We see a half naked woman wearing only a brassiere, which is the product advertised. She looks and smiles to the viewer. With her nudity and tempting smile, she looks very sexy and inviting. The copy operates intertextually, using a well known phrase "May West." Assuming that an exchange of meaning has already been accomplished between the female model and the viewer based on the visual imagery provided, the copy further addresses the reader directly through the explicit use of the word "you" in the text: Or Are You...
yet another stylized and distorted representation. It is a woman without face, arms and legs; but constituted of breasts, belly and genital organ. The image indicates that "she" is wearing a body briefer which further signifies sexuality. Her face is substituted with the lid: to be pulled out of the can - the prison? - and brought onto surface, into existence. Lack of her arms closes any possibility of resisting to be pulled out of the can. The faceless woman represents all but none of the women. She is a commodity woman created by the product. Yet the ad leaves opaque who has pulled her out of the can in the first place. While the potential female consumer is the would-be possessor of the product and, thereby, gains all the rights resulting from her possession and the power to bring into existence the woman in the perfume / inside her, the signature of Jean Paul Gaultier implies both the presence of a man and the logic of the market who are together in control of the overall process.

In both Wonderbra and Jean Paul Gaultier ads, and in many similar other advertisements in various product categories that are targeted toward women, only a minimal or no product attribute is communicated to the consumer. Rather, these advertisements depend heavily on visual imagery and representations that aim to portray a certain type of femininity that can be achieved through the use of the product advertised. However, even though the formal elements and layout of the advertisements privilege a particular reading, we, as viewers, do not come naked to ads and simply take on these representations. We are already acquainted with and experience many of the contradictions involved in our gender identity, both in our private lives and in the public domain. Hence, the extent of the exchange of meaning depends ultimately on the degree of the struggle over the meaning: that is, whether the viewer passively accepts the representation and promise offered in the advertisement or actively deconstruct the assumptions made about the female identity and produce counter readings.

RESISTANCE THROUGH OPPOSITIONAL DECODING?

The theoretical framework that incorporates the notion of a viewer who can resist the dominant meanings of a media text is introduced by Stuart Hall (1980) in his famous "Encoding/Decoding" model. Drawing from the works of Volosinov (1973) and Gramsci (1971), Hall redefines ideology as a "site of struggle" for the competing definitions of reality and argues that producing meaning is not a politically neutral practice; dominant power structures invariably try to influence signification but success is not guaranteed.

In the "Encoding/Decoding" model, Hall identifies three hypothetical positions from which decoding of media messages can be constructed. The first position is that of the dominant - hegemonic. The viewer, in this case, interprets the message within its "dominant code" and reads the encoded preferred meaning "full and straight." However, although the majority of audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined, they may decode them in a different or globally contrary way. Thus, Hall identifies two additional positions for the viewer: negotiated and oppositional. The negotiated position "...acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions...while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules - it operates with exceptions to the rule." On the other hand, the viewer can decode the message in a totally contrary way. In what Hall refers to as the oppositional position, the viewer "totalizes the message in a preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference."
Although the first version of the encoding/decoding model was later criticized and revised to overcome its limitations and account for the much more dynamic and complex nature of the process of meaning formation (see, for example, Liebes and Katz 1990; Morley 1993; Radway 1984), it, nonetheless, motivated many researchers to approach the audience/text interaction as a site of struggle, and oppositional decoding as an act of resistance.

Pursuing this approach, some writers, usually characterized as "postmodern," argue that many feminist readings of soap operas, romance novels, and women's magazines fail to see that fashion and beautification are among the few areas in which female desire can legitimately be expressed, and overlook the ways in which women can actively resist or transform the meanings of media messages (see Davis and Fisher 1993; Wilson 1985). For example, Lovell, in her study of the longest-running soap opera on British television, Coronation Street, challengingly argues that soaps can actually subvert the values of a male-dominated society. She insists that "because popular culture does not belong to ... feminism and revolution, it is not captured for reaction, patriarchy and domination either. ... it is situated ambivalently and in contradictory ways in relation to both." (1981:49). Taking very seriously the potential of interpreting media texts oppositionally, Robinson (1983) argues that the range of possible reactions is much wider than we assume. She suggests that audiences may transform messages to provide social alternatives or solve problems in ways that are very different from those suggested by the media. In fact, according to Fiske (1989), one of the pleasures derived from the consumption of mass media is a consequence of the construction of counter-hegemonic meanings which resist subordination.

However, arguments about the resistance and empowerment of the viewer primarily rest upon two assumptions, both of which are highly questionable. First they assume that media texts are equally open to alternative or oppositional readings. Yet, as it will be argued in detail in the following section, advertisers, especially since the mid-1980s, have increasingly incorporated the elements of oppositional readings into the very structure of the ads, blurring the power of the dominant meaning within a "multiplicity" of interpretations. Second, they presuppose that the viewers have equal capital and intention to interpret media messages in alternative and resistive ways. However, as Bourdieu (1984) clearly demonstrates, depending upon the complex intersections of class location with gendered, ethnic and generational subjectivities, one's access to both material and symbolic resources is highly constrained and patterned.

Furthermore, such arguments, overall, fail to show that these activities have any effect on the real structures of power in the society. The glossy layouts of the advertisements are not only pleasurable to the eye but offer beauty as a goal accessible to all women. Unlike achievements in social, political or economic domains, the pursuit of beauty becomes desirable, rewarding and within everyone's reach at any time as long as the prescribed products are consumed. It is because the preferred readings of ads continuously associate the constructed standards of femininity with a timeless, essentialist and universal notion of womanhood that to resist the dominant representations of femininity, not merely at a private, but at a public level, is truly to go against the established norms of the culture, but at a great personal risk. Many women who have been sexually rejected for not being attractive enough, or too fat, and fired from their jobs for looking too old,
know the consequences of such resistance well.

Moreover, the overemphasis on viewers’ resistive and oppositional decoding misleadingly assumes a static notion of marketing and advertising practices. On the contrary marketing is a dynamic process that responds to the changes and developments in the society. In order to maintain profitability and sales, companies need to respond, incorporate and eventually overcome any opposition or resistance raised towards their persuasive attempts. By offering something for everyone and valorizing difference as opposition, marketers have the potential of co-opting and reappropriating resistive readings. As Kellner argues “...even production of alternative meanings and resistance to ‘preferred meanings’ may serve as effective ways of absorbing individuals into the established society. Producing meanings can create pleasures that integrate individuals into consumer practices which above all profit media industries” (1995:41). It is the nature of this dialectical interface between the viewer and the marketer that the remainder of the paper will focus on.

MARKETING RESISTANCE: 
The Dialectics Of Viewer-Advertiser Interaction

Although advertisements favor particular readings, like other cultural texts, their meanings are open to be resisted and contested. As Scott correctly suggests “If the persuasive acts fails, not because some magical formula was not correctly followed, not because the reader’s brain failed to process the information correctly, not because recall did not occur at the moment of purchase, but because the reader rejected the proposition” (1994b:473, emphasis in original). Unfortunately, to date, very little research attention has been given by consumer behavior scholars to the notion of a reader who actively screens out the advertising messages, selects and resists to some or all of the meanings. Within the traditional information processing paradigm, reader resistance and opposition have usually been regarded as avoidance of effortful cognitive activity and laziness, and hence, a failure in the persuasive act. Recently Friestad and Wright (1994) called attention to how people develop and use persuasion knowledge to cope with persuasion attempts. Even though they do not assume that people typically use their persuasion knowledge to resist a persuasion attempt, they nonetheless suggest that people develop various coping tactics including “balanced elaboration” – some support arguing, some counterarguing -- in dealing with persuasive acts.

The notion of viewer resistance to advertisements becomes much more compelling if such opposition is voiced collectively, or at least by a certain social group, as in the case of advertisements targeted towards women. I acknowledge that a comprehensive understanding of reader resistance requires the empirical analyses of both the viewers’ interpretations of ads and the behavioral consequences of oppositional decoding, and producers’ implicit assumptions about women. However, as an initial step in this direction, the rest of the paper will attempt to conduct semiotic/structural analyses of a number of exemplar ads in order to argue that feminist criticism and opposition to the portrayals of women in advertisements have been skillfully incorporated and managed by marketers through tactical addition of new representations that seem to acknowledge gender equality and liberation.

Confronted with the increasing feminist criticism towards the “false” representations of femininity, advertisers, since the mid-1980s, started to depict women in relations of equality with men and stressed
women's expanding opportunities. More and more ads portrayed women in traditionally male domains, engaging in activities that were unusual for them before. Paralleling the changes in women's social position, the advertising messages seemed to be changing too.

However, beneath the changes on the surface, very little in terms of gender traits is different. What appears to be the change is a new persuasive tactic that turns resistance itself into a sign. As Faludi notes:

“[s]oon after the emergence of the second wave of the women’s movement in the early seventies, Madison Avenue sought to convince women that they could attain feminist objectives via the market place. They could attain the right independent lifestyle and 'have it all' if they bought the right products, drank the right diet drinks, smoked the right cigarettes. Feminism reinterpreted by advertising's creative directors, was simply a form of narcissism that could be stated in the shopping mall and the mirrors of mass media” (1995:39).

On the one hand there is the all powerful woman enjoying an unusual form of relationship with men. Many ads exploit role reversal techniques to represent women’s newly achieved ‘equality’ with men. Often these ads include a male in their visual images and/or texts who is subtly threatened by the woman’s enhanced status and power. The woman is usually shown as having control over the man or over her relationship with him, thus inverting the roles of the dominant and the subordinate. Such strategy is at play in the Betry Barclay ad (Plate - 3) where it is the woman who "has the last word.” Here the woman, standing and ready to leave, is the active and dominating party, while the man is sitting helplessly and passively in front of her. Although we do not know on what the woman had the last word, the ad motivates us to enjoy the pleasure of being able to say the last word and commands to ‘be our own woman’ but not his. Similarly, the ad for Virginia Slims (Plate - 4) urges women to stop what they have been traditionally expected to do and to take on a new attitude: Sit and wait for a phone call? Forget that number. Obviously the call referred to is to come from a man. Here the woman, besides rejecting to comply with what is regarded as the normal and challenging the dominating role of the male in a relationship, is also shown in a previously male domain: riding a bike. The juxtaposition of her and the bike transports the meanings associated with the bike - independence, rebellion, mobility - to her, hence strengthening the oppositional appearance of the ad. For those who have forgotten, Virginia Slims feel necessary to remind that we (women) have come a long way.

On the other hand there is the new super, multi-faceted woman who is self-confident, in control, independent yet beautiful, stylistic, attractive and feminine. Such a woman is portrayed in the Lycra ad (Plate - 5). She is in control of her body - she swims, exercises, cares for her skin. She is present both at the spheres of leisure and work, successfully managing her time between them. She is always on the move and independent. She has sophistication and exhilaration. She both looks better and feels better.

It may be argued that, by inverting gender roles, such advertisements offer a transgressive, subversive model of femininity and become resistive transcripts themselves. However this reading fails to take into account the normalizing messages present in the structure of the ad as well as the resistive elements. First, the organizational strategies outlined in the
first section are still operative in these ads, although, now, they are more skillfully disguised. Second, there is a visual image directly stemming from the model's body itself that continues to reproduce the traditional female identity - looking attractive - although, now, based on a different ground. Third, the transgressive elements are intentionally provided by the producers of the ads for the purpose of coping with and managing the resistance and criticism voiced by women. Four examples are chosen to illustrate these points.

**Jean Paul Gaultier:**

The blatant commodification of woman also prevails in this version of the Jean Paul Gaultier ad (Plate - 6). Similar to the previous one, the visual structure is highly stylized and surrealistic. Stealing from the various artistic forms, the ad skilfully blurs the distinction between art and commerce, making the reading more difficult. However, here, there are new signifiers that need close attention. Unlike in the former ad, the woman is positioned out of the can. In fact, as the can is not even open, there is no reason to think that someone has pulled her out of it. Although the woman's body is still fragmented and commodified, a new relation between the "real" woman (represented by the photographic image of the fingers) and the "commodity" woman (represented by the graphical image of the perfume bottle like woman body) is introduced. It is the woman herself that holds, possesses and uses the bottle, suggesting that she is in control of the situation. Yet, at a deeper level, two contrary signifiers representing the resistance and normalization are simultaneously at work. The tattoos on her two fingers are clearly a symbol of counter culture and resistance. Within the overall graphical structure of the ad, they are both out of place and seem to be transgressive - a symbol of the "low Other" sneaking into the art-like domain of the high culture. However, when closer attention is given to the pointing finger, it is seen that the transgression is quickly absorbed and heavily sanctioned: she is tied to the bottle by a clip on her nail. She is no longer in a position of control but in a forced and imposed relationship. She seems to be in control of the bottle, hence her body and sexuality, but it is not a free choice.

The woman is still commodified, fragmented and defined primarily in sexual terms. Apart from a momentary promise of resistance, the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and commodity relations are still prevailing. The outcome is stylistic illusion of empowerment of the woman and confusion for the viewer as a result of the bizarre juxtaposition of multiple and distant signifiers aimed to disguise hegemony.

**Virginia Slims:**

Now let's go back to the Virginia Slims ad (see Plate - 4) and try to reveal how interpellation, direction of gaze and reaffirmation of the traditional female gender trait - looking attractive - are in operation. The ad's mode of address not only invites the female viewer to make the exchange of meaning between the model and herself but also creates the impression that the two women are talking with each other and agreeing upon what they should do. Although the baby (itself a very sexist expression) has come a long way and is ready to forget the man who does not call her, her photographic image is loaded with the dominant meanings of the idealized female body: slim, fit, attractive, youthful and sexy. The way she stands (her legs separated) and dressed up (a tight outfit showing the body contours, and black, high-heel shoes) seems to portray a woman who is posing in front of a model rather than riding a bike. The woman's stance suggests that she is aware of her appearance and performs a narcissistic self-observation. But who is the surveyor? Although the model urges
is the female viewer to be the spectator-owner of her own appearance, the implicit presence of the male gaze cannot be discounted. In fact while the text and the bike stand for a new attitude and a reversed colonization (invading a predominantly male domain), the artificial relationship between her and the bike (she has only a slight physical contact with it rather than sitting on it) makes it unclear whether such moves are for redefining the terms of the relationship between men and women or merely suggesting the women to forget the previous would-be lover and to go and look for another guy.

**Vavoom:**

The story in the Vavoom ad (Plate - 7) is also based on the themes of the new female identity, change and power. The caption "invent, reinvent" suggests that something that has not been available before has been found. The word ‘invention’ connotes possessiveness and power: you are the person that brings something into existence and gains all the rights accruing from your work. The copy reminds the female viewer what her identity means and what she can achieve: *Identity. Revealing who you are. Looking one way. Changing in the next.* She is the new woman who is not static but lives through a continuous change, hence, unpredictable. She tactically plays with her identity whenever she wants to: *With one cut, you have the freedom. The power to change. If you can visualize it, you can do it.* She is all too powerful, can do whatever she wants, whatever she can think of. If she wants she can have the freedom. Although at the first level the word “cut” refers to the haircut (it is an ad for a hair-care product), on a second level it connotes breaking away from, cutting across and transgressing the rules and norms that imprison. However, the transgressive elements are again immediately normalized through the visual images of the female models. The appearances and figures of the two female models are still in line with the idealized female body. The power and the freedom the woman has depend on a calculated and voluntary work on her appearance, which at the end is mediated and achieved through the “creative tools” of Vavoom “for personal styling.”

**Sprite:**

The ad for Sprite (Plate - 8) exemplifies how the content of feminist resistance is incorporated and turned into a new sign through a skillful reflexivity. On the one hand, the copy and the goddess-like woman figure on top of the world tell and remind the female viewer what being a woman means today: *You’re a woman of the 90’s. Bold, self-assured and empowered. Climbing the ladder of success at work and the StairMaster at the gym. You are socially aware and politically correct.* On the other hand the copy also teases with these: *But you probably know this already because every ad and magazine has told you a zillion times._* No wonder you’re thirsty. Multiple meanings deconstructing each other are intentionally provided in the advertisement. The power and success are linked to the control over bodily appearance (climbing the StairMaster at the gym). It is admitted that the recipe of the new woman is given by the advertisements. The whole struggle for the definition of the new woman is, then, trivialized (no wonder you’re thirsty). The woman, although now empowered, is still unsatisfied. What remains at the end is the usual suggestion: obey your thirst and consume what the advertisement tells you. In fact, as the ad is for “diet” Sprite: consume something that will not threaten your figure, hence your power.

Those who are convinced that gender equality has been achieved may read these ads as offering a subversive femininity. However, the transgressive elements in these ads are always and immediately normalized. While symbols
of resistance are included and sexualization of woman is pretended to be rejected, the dominant images of the ideal female body are retained.

**CONCLUSION**

The relationship between gender and advertising is a complex one. Despite three decades of feminist criticism of the portrayals of women in advertising, the way female identity is presented is still problematic today. While, the fact that some ads continue to show women in stereotypically sexual roles does not necessarily indicate that sexism is as strong as ever, equally, the appearance of female executives in suits or female bikers, do not signal the end of sexism. Advertising messages are open to different interpretations and oppositional decodings; thus both the ideological structure of advertisements and the notions of "resisting reader" and "text rejection" demand critical research attention.

Although no claims can be made about how female viewers will interpret the advertisements analyzed in this paper, resistance to the images of women in advertising appears to be more difficult than it has been argued by some postmodern writers. The semiotic/structural analysis of the selected ads suggests that the very opposition to the way femininity is represented can be skillfully incorporated and sent back to the viewer. The new, super-woman portrayed in the advertisements today, partly as a response to the feminist criticism and partly as a result of the marketing research carried out by advertisers, is still based on the idealized images of the female body -- very appealing and attractive. The change as it is presented in the ads seems to be coming not from changes in the political and material domains but from individuated consumption and control over appearance. Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of resistance in the context of advertisements targeted toward women may shed additional light on comprehending the viewer-advertiser interaction in general. Recognizing the fact that text rejection is not a result of a failure in the persuasive act but of a conscious and active resistance on the side of reader opens up new research questions. For example, we may start researching the differential impact of social class, subculture, advertising literacy, age, ethnicity and body shape on the extent of resistance and oppositional decoding taking place. Similarly we may examine the behavioral consequences of resistance and its implications for both purchase behavior and self-identity. On the other hand, we may critically examine the implicit assumptions of advertisers regarding their target markets, and how they respond to and cope with opposition and resistance.

In the final analysis, as Scott suggests "[a]dvvertisements are not variables in a mathematical universe, but artifacts of culture "(1994b:478). Within the structure of ads meanings are created in a complex, interactive process. Critical analysis of this process is necessary for understanding how representations in advertisements work to define femininity or any other identity within the overall cultural realm.

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Isn't it great to have the last word.

Betty Barnum
P.O. Box 134
London W1A 1AN

Plate 3
VIRGINIA SLIMS

Sit and wait for a phone call? Forget that number.

Plate 4
invent reinvent

With one cut, you have the freedom.
The power to change.
If you can visualize it, you can do it.
Vavoom.
Creative tools for personal styling.
Pure, cutting-edge performance.
Only at your Matrix salon.
Call 1-800-MATRIX to find it.
You're a woman of the 90's

Bold, self-assured and empowered.

Climbing the ladder of success at work and the StairMaster™ at the gym.

You're socially aware and politically correct.

But you probably know all this already

because every ad and magazine

has told you a zillion times.

No wonder you're thirsty.

Cool, Crisp, Clear. Obey Your Thirst.

Plate 8