Experiencing Sexuality in the Advertising: Romance Versus Pornography

Ozlem Sandikci, Pennsylvania State University
Torsten Ringberg, Pennsylvania State University

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15643/gender/v04/GCB-04

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Experiencing Sexuality in the Advertising Imagery: Romance versus Pornography

Ozlem Sandikci, Pennsylvania State University
Torsten Ringberg, Pennsylvania State University

Recent research within consumer behavior emphasizes the role of gender and genre in the interpretation of advertisements and suggests that men and women differ significantly in their reading styles (e.g., Stern 1991; Stern 1993; Stern and Holbrook 1994). One domain that such differences become particularly visible is advertisements that employ sexual imagery. Sexual imagery in advertising is often criticized as commercial pornography (Miller 1959) that leads to objectification of, especially, the female body. However, not all sexual imagery is pornographic, and pornography itself is not a monolithic construct. Feminist literature suggests that the nature of pornography differs depending on whether the audience is male or female (Snitow 1978). Stern (1991) introduced Snitow’s distinction between hard-core pornography (violent sexual images that are more appealing to men) and soft-core pornography (romantic images that are more appealing to women) to the marketing literature, and offered an analysis of the elements of romance genre. However the follow up study by Stern and Holbrook (1994) revealed inconclusive results on whether reading styles flowing from gender differences reflect meaningful contrasts in the interpretation of advertisements that are exemplar of the romance genre.

We believe that some of the questions raised by previous research is indicative of the complex nature of the construct ‘gender’. While gender is an important and growing research domain, it is also important that we do not reduce gender differences to mere biological distinctions and exclude neither the multiple socially constructed sexual identities nor various other variables that shape one’s identity along with gender. Furthermore, we should be careful not to, first, generalize gender differences usually derived from the white middle-class perspective, to the entire male and female populations, and second, limit research only to decontextualized formal readings of advertisements. In this paper, we explore the interaction between gender and socio-cultural locale. Gender is treated as a social construct that does not necessarily correspond with a fixed genetic origin but rather as a complex web of practices, meanings, and sexual orientations. We interview groups of gays and lesbians, as well as straight men and women from different socio-cultural layers in an effort to get a relationally and contextually developed understanding of pornography and romance.

We aim to extend the existing literature in two major ways: First, we employ a phenomenological approach to locate the meanings of pornography and romance in the lived experiences of four different sexualities. Romantic and sexual fantasies are part of people’s identities and they are influenced both by subjective experiences and the imagery communicated within popular culture through advertisements, movies, novels, music videos etc. During the interviews, we seek to understand how lived experiences and popular images of romance and pornography interact with each other. In the second part, we explore how socio-cultural factors influence the interpretive strategies of the aforementioned sexualities. To assess socio-cultural factors we use cultural capital theory.
In its broadest sense cultural capital refers to an individual's world view that is influenced by his or her location in the socio-economic universe.

We collected data through in-depth interviews conducted with gays, lesbians, straight men and women with lower, middle and higher cultural capital. Print advertisements sampled from a range of magazines targeted to each group were used as the stimuli material. During the interviews the respondents were first asked to define romance and pornography in their own terms. Then they were given the ads and asked to sort them into groups of pornographic and romantic imagery, and elaborate on the reasons of their selections. If the respondent did not perceive the ads as either pornographic or romantic, he/she was probed to give reasons. Respondents who sorted out advertisements were then asked to pick one ad as best representative of pornography and another as best representative of romance, and elaborate on their selection. The interview transcripts are analyzed to find out similarities as well as differences both along the lines of sexual orientation and cultural capital.