This Not Your Father's Advertising: Gendered Interpretations of a Print Ad

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Ads are designed using symbols, text, and cultural experiences shared by both the reader of the ad, and the creator of the ad (Scott 1994a, b). The reader of an ad uses her knowledge of these shared symbols and experiences to understand the message the advertiser is trying to communicate. However, the interpretation of any ad is also influenced by the reader’s personal experiences and group membership (McCracken 1987, 1989; Scott 1994b). Since men and women read text through the filter of sex-specific concerns (Stern 1994), gender may be considered a significant influence on how an individual interprets a particular advertisement (cf. Holbrook 1986).

Prior research has identified different psychological orientations between men and women. Men are more self-focused, with agentic and independent orientations, while women have a more communal outlook and relate equally to the concerns of both themselves and others (Broverman et al. 1968; Gilligan 1982; Guttman 1970; Kogan 1976). In addition, women are generally assumed to be more emotionally expressive than men (McConatha, Lightner, and Deaner 1994) and consider emotional experiences more important to their lives than do men (Matlin 1993; Malatesta and Kalnok 1984). Socialization may constrain men’s expression of their feelings, however, it appears that it is acceptable for men to express negative emotions (Brehm 1992; McConatha et al. 1994). Such differences likely impact the responses of male and female consumers to an advertisement.

Furthermore, differences in the way men and women process information suggests the likelihood of gendered interpretations of advertising stimuli. According to the “selectivity model,” females are comprehensive information processors who consider both subjective and objective information presented in an ad, and respond to subtle, “impressionistic” cues when forming judgments. Males are characterized as selective information processors who tend to heuristically process ad information by focusing on a single particularly salient cue (or subset of cues) as a basis for judgment (Meyers-Levy 1989; Darley and Smith 1995). A study by Broverman et al. (1968) found that males were more analytical and logical information processors while females were more subjective and intuitive. Females often engage in more detailed elaboration of specific message content (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Gilligan 1982) and show greater sensitivity to the particulars of relevant information when forming judgments compared to males (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993).

Our study looked at what meanings consumers took away from an ad and how those meanings differed depending on whether a male or female spokesperson was portrayed in the ad. The two ads used in the study were actual print ads for the GMC Jimmy obtained from the advertising agency that created the ads. These ads appeared in late 1996 and early 1997 in publications such as Business Week and The New Yorker.

Both the male and the female versions of the ad identified the spokesperson in the ad by
name and included a personality profile of the spokesperson. At the top of the ad was a handwritten "to do" list, apparently written by the person in the ad. On the ground around the vehicle were various objects and possessions supposedly belonging to the spokesperson. Near the upper center of both ads was written "The Dreaded 'To-Do' List. The Everyday Conqueror." This set of ads was chosen both for its realism and because it offered a unique opportunity to explore gendered interpretations of print advertisements while holding many variables constant. While the gender of the spokesperson, the ad text, and the objects are different in each ad (but consistent within the ad), the headline, the brand, and the product (a green four-door Jimmy) are the same, as is the overall execution of the ad (background, text font, and layout). Assignment to ad condition (male or female spokesperson) was randomized.

Eighty-seven business students at a Midwestern university were offered extra credit for participating in the study. Of the 50 men and 37 women who participated, 55% had never been married, 37% were married, and 8% were separated, divorced, or widowed. The majority of the students were white (86%), 4% black, 6% Asian, and 4% other (Hispanic, American Indian, or multiracial). Mean age of respondents was 28 years (range 21 to 44 years).

Consistent with prior research, the responses of participants in this study indicated gender-specific differences in the way these men and women "read" the ad. For example, male respondents tended to focus on the tangible, concrete elements of the ad and were quite literal in their interpretation of the objects in the ad. Female respondents were more imaginative readers who tended to elaborate on the subtle, inferential cues in the ad. Men also tended to have rational, objective interpretations of the ad, and made quick judgments based on their first impressions. Women's responses tended to be more subjective and more emotional. The results suggest that distinctly gendered readings of advertisements exist for male and female consumers.