Women in Advertising and Effects on Product Consumption

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Introduction

“We need to reshape our own perception of how we view ourselves. We have to step up as women and take the lead” (Knowles, n.d.). This is a quote by famous singer and role model Beyoncé Knowles about her views on how to strengthen the portrayal of the feminist community. When considering female’s roles in advertising specifically, third-wave feminism has a great influence for the acceptance and appreciation of using sexual attributes and suggestive body images to sell products. However, traditional advertising of the past suggests that women are delicate and submissive. This representation of females can cause the rebellious outburst of empowerment and scandalous promiscuity seen in advertisements today. Researchers evaluate how effective advertisements are and society’s reactions to the advertisements by using social models and theories to further understand why advertisements have the effects that they do. This paper will investigate the relationship between effective advertisements and how women are portrayed in advertisements.

Women’s Roles and Third-Wave Feminism

Gender roles and sexual identifiers are made apparent by clothing choices and skin exposure on female models. To bring about capital gain and successfully sell a product, the role of women in advertising has been made into a competition of desirability and consumer approval. With the rising third-wave feminist trend, “ideal” women are being held to a higher physical standard than the accustomed norm. Third-wave feminism has allowed women to accept and use their bodies to hold power over their sexualized state in order to sell a product.
By using gender identification as marketing agents, advertisers enhance the idea of products specifically “speaking” to either men or women. Declared gender roles and the existence of sexual identities are made evident through advertising (Bratu, 2013). Gender roles can be influenced by clothing amount and coverage on models. For example, the amount of clothing worn by males and females in the average print advertisement differs. Many times, women are suggestively clothed, enhancing the perception that women are sexual objects. On the other hand, men are typically dressed in more clothing, which suggests composure, power and control (Carpenter & Edison, 2005). If the average woman in an advertisement were dressed more alike to a man, she would be interpreted similarly as well. This would give the impression that men and women are equally portrayed, which is clearly not the case in most print advertising.

Not only is clothing choice used to attract consumers, but advertisers also use visually emotional stimuli to sell products, such as models smiling or expressing pleasure with a product. When advertising uses the body as a “pursuit of pleasure” this introduces the idea that people try to avoid pain. Conveying messages that make a person want to avoid harm can persuade both men in women in abstract ways when using strategic advertising plans (Cohan, 2001). When viewing a happy and independent woman that is scantily dressed, it is assumed by consumers that the woman does not feel pain and is fully enjoying her surroundings as well as the product. Not only do gender stereotypes give off a certain viewpoint about the model, but also advertisements use these viewpoints as an approach to sell their products.

According to Bratu (2013), a woman’s body is the main resource to obtain capital gain. In advertising, suggestively portrayed women sell more and more products each day
day (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). With this in mind, advertisers tend to use and
depict beautiful women with great hair, pretty faces, and long legs. Bratu (2013) also
suggests that the main reason a woman can define herself as a woman is with the
possession of a “sexy body.” Therefore, when women view other women portrayed in
such a way, they feel the desire to be like those women in order to gain their own capital.
Using this consumer-psychology logic, companies assume products will not sell without
the use of women’s bodies and thus result in economic loss (Venkatesan & Losco, 1975).

With the influence that comes with sexualized advertising, there is also influence
from outside sources, such as third-wave feminism. Some strains of feminism encouraged
women to be empowered by being sexy, by being playful in their actions, and to
emphasize pleasure (Bratu, 2013). Third-wave feminism has a great deal to do with the
sexualized acceptance that most women hold today (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008).
Taking into consideration that third-wave feminism held ideals that supported the
progression of women in society, women took these ideals and created a whole new
curriculum for what it means to be a woman. Third-wave feminism has influenced print
advertising by changing the portrayal of the sexualized women from second-class sex
objects to independent, empowered and sexy women.

When feminist groups arose and when women started working and becoming
active in the political arena, it influenced a lot of popular discussion about the different
roles progression created (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999). These different roles started to
be expressed in advertising when women started accepting the idea of being sexualized as
a benefit in terms of profit for marketing. With the creation of this new perspective came
the contradicting and critical point of view about how “traditional women” were represented.

**Common and Uncommon Stereotypes of Women**

Common and more unique images of women in print advertising have been greatly affected by women’s progression into the professional world. This has resulted in the false imagery and body deception in today’s advertisements. The stereotypes of the “classic” and “modern” women have drastically divided. The ideal “classic” woman is shown as being soft and feminine, while ideal “modern” women are represented as being powerful and independent. Common viewpoints of the 1970’s show women as dependent, unprofessional and feeble. Traditional values on women and contemporary ethics help to create defensive, non-traditional viewpoints of women today.

According to past studies, advertising makes fallacies and fake representations of women (Carpenter & Edison, 2005). As women progressed from the domestic homestead to access the professional lifestyle, the ways in which women were portrayed and represented changed significantly (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999). With that being said, these fallacies of traditional and non-traditional women are the initial face of advertising for women (Leigh, Rathens, & Whitney, 1987). This can have a great influence in the way consumers consider a product. A woman who views an advertisement portraying a fully-clothed mom-figure with a mop in her hand may make the relationship between domestic representations and the traditional portrayal of women. This may lead to a positive or negative reaction in woman based on a number of different factors, including age and upbringing. Women who grew up with a feminist outlook would most likely take offense to the advertisement because it portrays the “ideal” women as domestic and non-
professional. Most women who used to be viewed as dependent and nurturing are now exploring a broader spectrum of being self-loving and deserving. These attributes give different ways of promoting a certain product to make it favorable over the others.

According to Kates & Shaw-Garlock (1999), when considering traits attributed to women, traditional roles such as weak or dependent have shifted to strong and independent. Most roles portrayed by women are those of housewives, sex objects, and a stimulus of sexual ideas (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). Although this is evident in research, the contradiction is that women roles touch on the ideals of a woman being tender, soft, and nurturing (Yu-Kung, 2014). Traditional women with these ideals were hardly ever recognized in the professional realm, especially during the 1970s.

In 1971, most women were not shown in working roles in media and advertising (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Instead, dependence, domestic attributes, incompetence and sexualization of women were all popular in the 1970s (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). This imagery of women soon became a controversial topic in print advertising. Consumers exposed to women in classic, domestic roles developed a negative attitude toward traditional portrayals of women (Leigh, Rathens, & Whitney, 1987). These negative attitudes derive from advertisements that showed the accustomed roles of women. When viewing the women in a traditional setting today, women are impacted immensely by the want to be independent and empowered.

**Advertising and Effects on Society’s Perceptions of Women**

By taking on a new paradigm and allowing women to show and welcome their true selves, companies can still excel in advertisement and sales without the use of nudity and suggestive behavior. Today’s advertising methods very often reflect the cognitive
response model (Leigh, Rathans & Whitney, 1987) by the understanding that some advertisements can affect not only the amount of product sold, but who it is that is buying the product. Often, the success of a product can be altered by the amount of sexism shown in the advertisements. In addition, the social comparison theory can demonstrate how people, including women, use their ethical judgments when viewing advertising, which often generates offensiveness. By using the cognitive response model and the social comparison theory, researchers can evaluate how advertisement imagery will determine consumers analyze and predict the effectiveness of product sales.

The level of sexual content in advertising today ranges from suggestive to full nudity and even some intercourse (Carpenter & Edison, 2005). By endorsing a new paradigm of acceptance of one’s self, the marketing of advertisements can focus themselves on the values of self-awareness these women hold instead of perceptions of weak stereotypes (Cohan, 2001). There is starting to be an increase in acceptance for women’s “flaws”, such as curvaceous figures and freckles. This brings up questions such as, “What is the perfect beauty ideal?” Consumers from different cultures evaluate this question differently because of influence from “beauty ideals” in advertisements (Frith, Ping & Hong, 2005). In cultures where women accept their flaws and show them to the world through advertising, this makes the consumer believe that they should accept their flaws too. Advertisements that employ this accepting attitude may be more effective since they make women feel accepted and unique, or in other words, confidence. In either case, how a woman is shown in an advertisement can change the effectiveness of the advertisement.
Roles expressed in advertising can sway the viewpoints of consumers, positioning them either in favor of the product or against the product just by the way it was shown and used in the advertisement (Leigh, Rathans, & Whitney, 1987). Leigh, Rethans & Whitney (1987) concluded that the cognitive response model suggests that role portrayals will affect advertising effectiveness to the degree of causing role-related thoughts. These subconsciously created gender roles affect product sales and effectiveness of advertisements. The new paradigm of today’s world states that a product can gain success without portraying women as sex objects or portraying stereotypes (Cohan, 2001). Instead, women should be represented as what real women actually look like without digital editing or makeup to cover their natural beauty. By representing women with flaws, women viewing advertisements may become more empowered to accept who they are. Not only do consumers subconsciously use the cognitive response model as a way to compare, but they also use individual understandings to make product choices.

Individual morals and ethics can play a huge role in how advertisements are perceived (Dickenson & Gill, 2009). According to David, Boyne & German (2009), people can evaluate themselves or others through the process of social comparisons. The social comparison theory suggests that people judge ethical perspectives of themselves by comparing themselves to alike others (Dickenson & Gill, 2009). This being said, if a model is similar to, has like-attributes of the consumer or is represented in a positive and desirable way, there is more likely a chance for an individual to purchase the product.
References


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