

The Selling of Gender Identity

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There is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that print advertisements and television commercials have finally begun to respond to the needs of a culturally diverse population. The bad news is that despite some progress, the stereotyping of many groups based on gender, age, and race continues and leads to some serious consequences. All too frequently women are still portrayed as sex objects and in subservient roles. Sometimes, however, in an effort to target segmented markets, we see some strange attempts at depicting egalitarianism. For example, cigarette ads are now directed specifically toward working women ("You've come a long way baby"- now you, too, can die of lung cancer at the same rate as men).

THE IMPACT OF ADVERTISING

Advertising clearly plays a critical role in both reflecting and shaping culture. Thus, while commercials and advertisements usually depict recognizable and socially acceptable scenarios, they also attempt to mold public opinion with respect to new products and services that people may not even know they want. What men and women do know, what they have learned, are role-appropriate behaviors (e.g., the attributes or activities that contribute to the image of a successful male executive or a good mother). The media reinforce these concepts. They try to convince women that one of their major responsibilities is to remain magically young and attractive forever by purchasing the correct products and services.

For example, in the June 1995 issue of *Vogue* magazine, a whole periodical devoted to appearance, fashion, health, and other women's issues, a Revlon advertisement for Age Defying Makeup shows Melanie Griffith (a near-forty film star) with copy that talks about how to look younger. While most manufacturers are very careful not to promise miracles, if the reader is not careful the message starts to sound as if real changes in the texture of the aging skin will occur. This product says only that it makes fine lines seem to disappear. "Seem" is the operative word.

Further on in the same magazine, Estee Lauder, another cosmetic company, promotes Advanced Night Repair: Protective Recovery Complex. This company claims that the product will prevent environmental damage from ultraviolet rays and free radicals that may cause premature aging (a condition clearly to be avoided at all costs). Another ad by Lancome describes a product called Expressive, which should be used to reinforce the fragile eye area. Among the articles in the same issue of *Vogue* are "Reversing Sun Damage" and "Perfecting the Fake Tan," a way of looking tanned without incurring the skin damage that results from natural tanning. The preponderance of information and ads on skin care in women's magazines clearly plays on their fears of aging and abandonment.

Lest one think that advertisers have ignored the vanity of the male reader, in the March 1995 issue of *GQ* (*Gentlemen's Quarterly*), there is an ad for Clinique's Face Scrub, part of its line of skin supplies for men. The ad says the product will revive a man's looks. The balance of advertisements and articles in a magazine that targets a male readership, however, differs from that found in such periodicals as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Seventeen*. Most of the ads in *GQ* are for clothing, shoes, alcoholic beverages, and cars (sometimes in two-page spreads). The only other appearance-related ad is for Rogaine, to regrow hair. The ad describes research results, complete with statistics, to demonstrate Rogaine's effectiveness. This issue of *GQ* contains no major articles on skin care and only a few on exercise. The rest focus on selling expensive

clothing items. Very few women are depicted in either the articles or the ads. When they are shown, they are usually completely nude. In a Calvin Klein ad for his men's cologne, Obsession, Kate Moss, an almost childlike model, reclines nude and alone looking straight at the camera. The inference is clearly that someone similar to her will be waiting for the user of Obsession.

There is nothing new about the focus on eternal youth and beauty. For years, cosmetic and skin care products have been sold to women with the promise of looking younger and/or catching a man. The slogan for Pond's cold cream linked it with being engaged. A recent Maybelline commercial suggests that the female models look younger than they are because they use its products. What a miraculous process, ten years off your life instantly. The men's skin care market never really grew as many experts predicted it would. In the last few years, ads and commercials have played not only on male sexual anxieties, but also on the fear of losing one's job to younger competitors. Advertisers are very adept at addressing every group's insecurities and survival and self-esteem needs.

SEGMENTING

Both the female and the male markets are segmented by age, ethnic and racial group, socioeconomic class, urban or rural environment, occupation, and marital status. The interactions among these categories further divide both markets. Thus, the needs and wants of a twenty-something African-American single mother who has a full-time job and lives in an urban environment have been recognized as being different from those of men and women in other categories. Magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence* address these needs and send messages about the values they support.

Since times change, evaluations of a segmented market's needs and wants must be constantly updated. For example, the clothing preferences of women in their forties in the 1950s were very different from those of the same age category today. Their discretionary buying power and their need to please other family members before themselves have also changed. Women in this age category are more likely to be employed outside the home than they once were, to be divorced, to have little time for shopping and food preparation or even a strong interest in such activities. Instead, "They prize convenience and service when they shop" (Leeming & Tripp 103).

Survey data indicate that women are still the primary shoppers for an overwhelming majority of American households. It is estimated that the percentage ranges from 70 percent to 85 percent in terms of the purchase of groceries and durable goods. Many social changes have influenced the impact of women not just as gatekeepers for the household, but also as individuals making their own choices. Historically the needs of the country during World War II brought more women into the economy and placed them in decision-making positions. After the war, with the advent of the women's movement and the development of effective birth control measures, even women who could do so were often unwilling to resume traditional roles. With high divorce rates and economic problems, it became all the more imperative that women support themselves and their children. They developed new needs and wants. Prepared foods and fast-food emporiums began to flourish. Other lifestyle changes included putting a premium on efficient time utilization and labor- and time-saving devices. Magazine spreads and ads for convenience products, clothes, and other important items that actually save the shopper time and effort appeared now. TV networks and home shopping catalogues cater to the individual or family whose time constraints make shopping very difficult, if not impossible. On the other hand, a visit to the local mall on the weekend seems to be a very popular pastime.

Many contemporary women, despite layoffs and recent economic downturns, have sufficient discretionary income to spend on the goods and services they

want. They are more educated and sophisticated than previous groups of female consumers. While the women's market is multidimensional, relating to both the demographics and the psychographics of each segment, there is a similarity in women's critiques of the content of advertising campaigns. Not only do many of them find some of the content offensive, but also they suggest that women continue to be stereotyped (so are men) and that they cannot relate to the female models who are very young, very thin, and very beautiful. These women also criticize infomercials as being extremely misleading. Some of these infomercials use a very hard sell approach, sometimes bordering on fraud, to promote expensive skin products, special diet programs, and exercise equipment (also directed at men).

GENDER IDENTITY AND THE USE OF STEREOTYPES

The advertiser constructs a scene complete with actors using scripts to send a message to a target audience. Due to the brevity of these mini plays, the message must be easily decodable, but not insulting to the audience's intelligence. Therefore, the use of recognizable models or stereotypes for the characters facilitates the advertiser's goal of selling products to specific groups. Audiences have become more sophisticated in recent years than they once were. For example, they may wonder if the film has been retouched or if the actors who are posing as normal and natural people are actually wearing concealing theatrical makeup.

Regardless of one's philosophical or political position on feminist issues, gender is still one of the most basic categories in any culture (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears 371). The process by which we identify not only people, but also vocabulary and speech patterns, gestures and behaviors, objects, and activities as either "masculine" or "feminine" is called "gender typing." Gender stereotypes are schemata (cognitive structures) about traits and behaviors that are perceived as typical of average or "normal" men and women. Sometimes an attribute that is positively correlated with one sex is seen as a negative or abnormal characteristic in the other, even among mental health professionals who should know better. While we can easily identify examples of cultural stereotypes that have more or less universal recognition within the society, many people hold personal stereotypes that deviate in one or more ways from those cultural images. Personal stereotypes are frequently based on individual experience. Cultural stereotypes strongly influence our perceptions of people, particularly when specific information is limited and when the issue of gender itself is salient. There is already sufficient evidence in the social sciences to indicate that stereotypes can bias the evaluation of the characteristics and performances of individuals and whole groups (e.g., women drivers). One of the most serious consequences of the influence of stereotypes is that as a member of a society, a person may actually accept its beliefs about masculinity and femininity and incorporate those beliefs as important elements in his or her own self-concept. If that person's traits and characteristics fail to meet the social ideal, the result is frequently low self-esteem and sometimes even depression.

When we encounter new people for the first time, we engage in a process of person perception that depends on a quick interpretation of their attributes, especially the visible ones. Usually the process is automatic and surprisingly accurate. For example, when we meet a small child dressed in blue jeans, a white tee shirt, and sneakers and sporting a short haircut, we assume the child is a little boy. If we discover we are wrong, we feel not only embarrassed, but probably cheated as well. Little girls are supposed to dress like girls even at play. The shirt should have been pink or printed with flowers. The hair should have been longer and tied with a ribbon. We have developed expectations that people should and will utilize appropriate dress and other cues to their gender identity. Most of the time they do.

Although we may decry the use of sex-role stereotypes (both positive and negative) as limiting, they do serve a purpose, or they would not survive (a little Social Darwinism). In this complex world, with its myriad conflicting inputs, we try to simplify our information-seeking and decision-making processes. Stereotypes help us to come to rapid conclusions, which, albeit incorrect in many instances, keep society moving. In these times of constant change and disconfirmed expectations, men and women alike would prefer to have the "right" answers, the correct way of behaving, and the most appropriate strategies for success handed to them on the proverbial silver platter. We look toward experts to provide simple and easily processed answers to our problems. Commercials appear to do just that; they give us the one-minute solution. Many of the products deal with some of our most pressing needs, such as the need to feel safe, secure, and loved as men and women. Despite the fact that we live in an age and a milieu of changed ideals and metaphors as well as altered family structures and evolving work and class relations, there is a nostalgia, a yearning for times that seem to have been simpler and more manageable. For example, contemporary brides frequently choose the most traditional gowns. Bridesmaids are dressed to look like shepherdesses in the middle of middle-class, Middle America. The reality of the divorce rate, the predominance of female-headed households, and the growth of a huge underclass typified by urban poverty are only beginning to be reflected in the media.

While the focus of postmodernism has been on the philosophical aspects of social analysis, feminists have emphasized social criticism and have often attacked the contents of media programming and advertising. The critic Harold Bloom (cited in Lehman) proposed the title "The School of Resentment" as an umbrella term for the critical theories that he saw emanating from university literature departments. Among these theories, he included deconstructionists, semioticians, and the most recent school of feminists. He suggests that "literary criticism is used as a weapon on behalf of groups perceived as historical victim-it is their way to get even with their oppressors" (quoted in Lehman 27). The implication is that the criticism is more vindictive than it needs to be. However, if we go all the way back to G.W. Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* and Erving Goffman's works on gender, we find that insufficient change has been made in recent decades with respect to negative gender and racial stereotypes. The critiques are more than justified. Innovation in advertising seems to involve selling what we did not know we needed to solve problems we did not know we had in the service of some traditional and some new goals using creative and postmodernist strategies.

Goffman defines advertisements as "highly manipulated representations of recognizable scenes from 'real life.'" In her introduction to Goffman's book on gender in advertising, Vivian Gornick states that the feminists have prodded social scientists into examining the most ordinary exchanges and behaviors that involve men and women so that a better understanding of the social forces that account for these behaviors is developed. Goffman himself suggests that we ought to ask ourselves what ads tell us about ourselves. He also suggests that we should question the relationship between what we see as constructed images (ads and commercials) and so-called natural behavior.

In the scripted and manipulated commercial, however fanciful, the scene must strike a responsive chord and play to the audience's system of needs and values, or it will not sell products. Ads do not necessarily display how men and women actually behave, but how we think or wish they would behave. We suspend our disbelief in an effort to accept the storyline we are seeing. Otherwise, we would have to believe that the choice of a coffee or cereal brand occupies most of the waking thoughts of people in the real world.

The advertising industry has become so influential in educating people about how to behave and dress that it is being called upon to solve major social problems such as substance abuse and the transmission of AIDS. At the same time that the field is being asked to respond to social challenges, fashion models (both male and female) have become the new celebrities. In fact, teenage models

who are not required to act or even talk have become the ideal of womanhood in magazines. "In the fashion world of the 90s," according to Jennifer Egan in a Sunday *New York Times Magazine* article, "teenage models simulate an adulthood they've yet to experience for women who crave a youthful beauty they'll never achieve" (26). The lifestyle of "James" King, a 16-year-old highly successful model, actually warranted the cover and 14 pages of the *Times* Sunday magazine. Many of these models are school dropouts who live on coffee and cigarettes to maintain their anorectic images. The worship of adolescent models has inspired many young (and older) women to follow their dieting regimen, with serious consequences.

The women in most ads that depict an upper-upper-class life style are thin, are well built (nudity is no problem), and engage in gazing at the successful males in their lives. They often have their fingers in their mouths or are touching their own hair. The implication is that they achieved their enviable status by attracting a male protector, not by earning the income themselves. In 1979, Goffman wrote that women are "being saved from seriousness" by posing and acting like children, lowering their eyes, and being seductive. Have times changed? We think not enough. Such roles and behaviors as Goffman discusses may be as stifling and constricting to men as to women. Most rigid, stereotyped, and asymmetrical role relationships constrain behavior on both sides. Some asymmetrical roles such as host and guest are dyadically reversible. Since the participants have the opportunity to play both parts at different times, they may not be troubled by the one-sidedness of temporary relationships. If, however, the asymmetrical relationship is relatively permanent and clearly has advantages associated with the dominant position and disadvantages associated with the subservient position, the lower-level participant may engage in ingratiation techniques, work hard at being lovable and attractive, or rebel. For those who want to please, there are innumerable products to assist in the process.

THE NATURE OF "REAL" MEN AND WOMEN

In the analysis of "signs" (indicators) about human behavior, Goffman wrote that "a particular behavior need not be construed as characteristic of a class of individuals but the *tendency* to possess such states and concerns is seen as an essential attribute" (7). A behavior may attract attention simply because it is *not* considered a natural component of the person's gender identity. A man may be shown diapering a baby, but the act is not necessarily considered an essential expression of maleness, or a woman who works may be considered a marginal laborer who is only marking time until she can find a man to take care of her and can be a real woman.

The nature of gender-essential elements may differ according to the characteristics of the audience. For example, women perceiving themselves as a group may identify different characteristics than men asked to delineate the basic nature of women. Depending on the level of enculturation, there will, of course, be many similarities in both perspectives. Accurate communication and consensus about the essential elements in gender identity becomes a function of well-learned rituals and symbols rather than spontaneous expressions. Many individuals learn to simulate gender-appropriate behaviors successfully in order to gain or maintain membership in a particular reference group (e.g., heterosexual teenage males). Due to the strong influence of socializing agencies including the media, an individual may manifest a behavior that appears to be "spontaneous and unselfconscious, that is uncalculated, unfaked, natural" (Goffman 7), but that may in actuality be contrived and constructed. According to Goffman, "One might as well say there is no gender identity. This is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender" (8).

Gender identity is not the only focus of the advertising industry. Commercial pictures, moving and otherwise, have long been used to sell the image of a group

of people. In *The Faces of the Enemy*, Sam Keen clearly delineates how nations have sold the justification for war and destruction by depicting the enemy with animal-like faces (e.g., pigs and snakes) so that killing them seemed a reasonable act.

ANALYTIC CATEGORIES IN GENDER ADVERTISING

Goffman used a number of categories in his analysis of gender advertising that are equally relevant today. They include relative size and position, the feminine touch, function ranking, and the family.

Relative Size

Power, authority, rank, office, and renown are often depicted by relative size for both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. In this world, of course, the average man is taller than the average woman, but not necessarily so. In a study conducted by Judith Waters (unpublished data) a few years ago, college students were shown one of a set of three photographs of two young adults (a male and a female). In one photo, the man appeared taller than the woman, while in the second, they were both the same height, and in the third, the woman appeared taller. Students were asked to write brief stories about each "couple." Invariably they saw the photo of the taller man and shorter woman as a scene between lovers. On the other hand, the taller woman was described as a parent, a sister, a teacher, or an employer, but never as a romantic character. The couple of equal size were also described as relatives or just friends. If we watch commercials and TV dramas and comedies, we find few fictional or real-life couples where the woman appears taller. One exception to this rule is Jill Eikenberry and Michael Tucker, characters on the once popular "L.A. Law" and married in real life. In a study of children's readers from five countries, Florence L. Denmark and Judith Waters found that boys were usually represented as older and taller than their sisters, who were often shown sitting at their feet. In some recent ads in the *New York Times*, women have been seated childlike on the floor. If you look at the height of their heels and the flimsy support of the shoes, it is probable that they could not stand or walk anyway. Most women call this type of footwear "sitting shoes."

Ben Zion Chanowitz and Robert Hanlon conducted a study of the ideal height differential for a male and female couple and found that it was four inches (with the male being taller, of course) (cited in Denmark and Waters 10). The average American man is 5 feet 9 inches and the average American woman is 5 feet 6 inches. If the woman is wearing three-inch heels, there is definitely a problem. The male does not always have to be taller than the rest of the group. Goffman demonstrated that sometimes power is depicted by having the male seated while others such as family members stand around him.

Feminine Touch

The way that women use their hands (complete with professionally polished long nails) and touch themselves, children, animals, or men demonstrates that they are still perceived as the gentle and graceful sex. Women, especially young women, are also shown with a finger or fingers in their mouths, just to remind us how vulnerable and powerless they are and how much they are in need of protection.

Function Ranking

When Goffman published *Gender Advertisements* in 1979, he had ample evidence for status differentials in print ads, with numerous examples of women as nurses and secretaries often taking instruction from a wiser man. Recent commercials, however, targeted to the ever-growing population of working and professional women, do portray women in positions of responsibility. In a

commercial for Saturn automobiles, a young female customer becomes so incensed at the sexist way an auto salesman deals with her that she decides to become a salesperson herself.

In advertising, voice-overs are more frequently male than female. The implication is that the male voice is more authoritative and credible even for household products than the female voice. Thus, it is clear that advertising conveys messages about the nature of men and women in both open and subtle ways. While in recent years there have been some changes, probably in order to avoid alienating potential customers, traditional stereotypes are still used extensively.

In their text, *Social Psychology*, Shelly E. Taylor, Letitia Anne Peplau, and David O. Sears summarize themes observed in the portrayal of men and women not only in advertising but in other publications such as children's literature in the following way:

Whereas men are shown in a wide variety of social roles and activities, women are more often restricted to domestic and family roles. Men are commonly portrayed as experts and leaders, women as subordinates. Men are usually depicted as more active, assertive, and influential than women. Although females are slightly more than half of the population, they are underrepresented in the media. (373)

The Family

More diverse types of family structures are growing in popularity with advertisers. A recent MCI commercial shows a large extended-family reunion with a voice-over by a man who acknowledges he is divorced and living in a different state from his ex-wife and their children, which is the reason he needs MCI's "friends and family" telephone service. In an instant- coffee commercial that has developed into a sort of mini-series, the female lead (and romantic partner) is discovered to be divorced with an adult son. Although this scenario is a new way of depicting relationships, her physical appearance is still emphasized. The woman looks only about five years older than her fictional offspring.

Sexuality in Advertising

In addition to Goffman's categories, we wish to suggest one of our own perspectives for evaluating the roles of men and women. This category is the relative use of men and women as blatant sex objects. Calvin Klein, who sells his perfumes and colognes with both nude females and nude males, is actually democratic. This is rarely the case. Advertisements for products in such women's magazines as *Cosmopolitan* depict men and women in romantic poses with the women in attractive and seductive outfits, while in *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, the women generally wear fewer clothes than the men, if anything at all. In one recent ad, there is a full-page display of a completely naked model bent over a pool table supposedly playing pool, but clearly waiting to be sodomized. There is no doubt that the advertisers are selling one image of women to women and another to the male audience. While it is much more difficult to engage in that type of market segmentation on TV than it is in the print media, one has only to watch major sporting events to see a more sexual view of women than those presented on both daytime and nighttime "soap operas." The emphasis on romance in *Cosmopolitan* and sex in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* is still the product of traditional stereotypes.

There is further evidence for variability in the quality of male and female images in the media. In a content analysis of 2,209 network TV commercials selected from daytime, evening, prime time, and weekend afternoon sports programming, R.S. Craig found that due to the imbalanced composition of the audience (e.g.,

more males than females watch sportscasts on Sunday afternoon), stereotypes matched the nature of the target market's image. Women in daytime programs are generally shown as American housewives and in subservient roles, while they are depicted as sex objects during sportscasts. However, commercials in evening programs other than sportscasts generally portray women in a more egalitarian and sophisticated fashion.

The correlation between the use of specific stereotypes on TV and the nature of the audience is not clearly causal. We must question whether TV programming and commercials, especially during daytime hours, encourage traditional sex-role behavior or whether traditionalists watch more TV because the content reinforces their preexisting beliefs. The answer is probably a little bit of column A and a little bit of column B.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF MEDIA INFLUENCE

In a study of the impact of TV commercials on participant behaviors, Jennings, Geis, and Brown found that whether or not consumers actually purchase the products advertised, they may be influenced by the implicit gender-typed messages that the commercials send. Clearly, of course, although not everyone personally accepts cultural stereotypes, these stereotypes still affect how people are treated and the jobs for which they will be hired. People discriminate even when they are not prejudiced. Since D.J. Bergen and J.E. Williams found that stereotypes about the personal characteristics of men and women have remained surprisingly stable over the years, these problems are likely to continue.

Segmenting markets does not alter the trend toward stereotyping. While there are stereotypes that pertain to men and women in general, there are specific stereotypes for different categories of men and women (e.g., mothers, grandmothers, teachers, librarians, corporate career women, teenage baby-sitters, and actresses). For example, people are very surprised to find that an actress or model has an advanced degree such as a Ph.D. We form schemata about specific categories of men and women that include personality traits, physical appearance, mode of dress, intellectual capacity, and typical behavior. Some of these schemata may even contain a grain of truth. The problem, however, is that it is very difficult to know whether the individuals in any single category naturally possess these traits or simply attempt to live up to their stereotypes.

It should come as no surprise that people respond more to the individual traits of a person and less to stereotypes when there is an opportunity to become better acquainted with the person. In advertisements, unless a well-known person (a celebrity, for example) is employed, the audience is supplied only with a brief scripted stereotype. With print ads, there is only a frozen image to use as a source of information. Limited information, as previously noted, increases the reliance on stereotyping.

THE CONSEQUENCES

The issue of gender stereotyping in advertising may seem trivial compared to some of society's more serious problems. This is especially true when we are discussing fashion and cosmetics. However, stereotyping can actually have very negative consequences. One study of gender bias in medical advertising found that physicians may be influenced by how men and women "patients" are portrayed in the ads in medical journals. First of all, women continue to be underrepresented in the ads. Second, women tend to look younger than the men, which implies that older women are unimportant or non-existent. In addition, the men look "serious," according to the research participants, while the women look "pleasant." The inference is that women's symptoms are to be taken less seriously than men's. Since cardiovascular disease, as one example, is the primary cause of death in this country for both men and women, even subtle

negative messages about the nature of women patients can be hazardous for their health. A casual examination of medical journals devoted to women (e.g., *The Female Patient*) indicates that a major category of advertisements is for psychotropic drugs such as Valium and Prozac. The implication may be that women's complaints are essentially psychological in origin, which precludes the necessity for laboratory testing or medical treatment.

The emphasis on physical attractiveness and weight loss in women's magazines, especially those targeted toward adolescent or young adult readers, may also lead to negative consequences. The inferences women draw from these advertisements are that one can never be too thin and that the end justifies the means. Thus, commercials or advertisements may cause or support the recent increase in such eating disorders as anorexia nervosa.

One of the most serious problems with the use of stereotypes on TV, whether in the scripts of programs or in commercials, is that children consume hours of TV messages each day. The more time children spend watching TV, the more they tend to hold stereotypic views of men and women and the jobs for which each sex is supposedly suited. Such children believe that only girls wash dishes and that only boys mow lawns and take out the garbage. They are also likely to retain these stereotypes as they grow older.

SUMMARY

Research indicates that while some positive changes have occurred in the way that men and women are portrayed in advertisements and commercials, stereotypes that can result in damaging consequences to every member of the population still exist. Although these stereotypes are marketed differently depending on the composition of the audience, they are available not only to all adults, but also to impressionable children. As two pragmatic applied psychologists, we suggest that the best social action to take in order to change the situation may be to boycott products that are promoted with sexist advertising messages. Such "green" power has always worked.

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