

With reference to consumer advertising in magazines discuss the view that the mass media continue to reinforce gender stereotypes.

In order to approach the subject of advertising reinforcing gender stereotypes one has to examine and consider adverts as removed from 'real life' and not - as argued by Dyer - 'replacing distorted images with representations of people and situations as they really are. (Dyer, 1982, p14) In other words there is a tendency to look for a reality in adverts that may not exist. However for many commentators there is a definite subordination of women in advertising. An argument based on women being portrayed as sexual objects, domestic workers who are either heavily reliant on or are trying to capture a man. 'Indeed Goffman argues that there is a 'strong relationship between adverts and reality and if anything they reinforce our stereotypes'. (Goffman' 1979, p84) Nonetheless what is overlooked in this perspective is that women are not one homogeneous group, there is a variety of social backgrounds therefore diversity in how a particular advertisement is read. To help clarify these positions this essay will examine two approaches to the study of advertising, namely content analysis and semiology while at the same time encompassing the different codes and conventions followed by advertisers. However as a starting point it will be useful to look at the findings of some relatively recent research carried out by the Advertising Standards Authority and the Broadcasting Standards Commission, to examine the regulations covering advertising and gender/sexual stereotyping.

Current regulations stipulate that 'particular care should be taken to avoid offence on the grounds of... Sex or sexual orientation' etc. (ASA, 1999) As part of the ASA's regular

research into consumer attitudes to non-broadcast advertising, over 1,000 people were surveyed in May 1998 to assess what is acceptable to the public. Compared to a similar survey in 1996, more people were offended at the way that women were portrayed as sex objects in advertisements (71% compared to 64% in 1996). In the last two years there has been a similar increase in the number of people expressing concern about the portrayal of men in advertisements. More people were offended at the way in which men are portrayed as sex objects in advertisements (53% compared to 41% in 1996), of which 20% said they were very offended, and 33% mildly offended (up from 15% and 40% in 1996). Judging whether something is distasteful or indecent is necessarily a subjective decision; what may be agreeable to one individual may be totally unacceptable to another. The Authority seeks to assess each complaint received on its own merits, looking at the product, the style of the advertisement, the choice of images and text, the current social climate, and the media in which the advertisement appeared. The ASA Council makes the final decision as to whether or not an advertisement is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. (ASA, 1999) These findings could be interpreted as pretty conclusive evidence that men and women are being stereotyped in advertising. Further evidence put forward by the BSC is also as damning at the representation of men and women in advertising.

This study entitled 'Sexual stereotyping in advertising' was carried out in the 1980s but only published in 1990 by the BSC. This body made up of twelve individuals-seven men five women- regards itself as the adjudicator of fairness and standards within the wide spectrum of broadcasting. Although this report was concerned with TV advertising it is

considered to be an indicator of what the field of advertising is like in its representations of both men and women. The conclusions drawn from this study were that TV commercials are male dominated. Men are used to sell products mainly bought by women, with Two-thirds of people seen in advertisements being men. 90% of voiceovers are male and Roles in advertising coincide with classic images of masculinity and femininity. Fair hair is seen as feminine; with only 10% of men in advertisements having blonde hair. 'Dependency' is emphasised with women often shown with a male partner. (BSC, 1990) The commission has clearly indicated that men dominate advertising and that women are on men and. It also can be seen to depict men and women in the perceived stereotypical roles within society. However clear-cut this may look to some commentators there is a need to look beyond the results and look at the methods chosen in this case content analysis- which enabled the commission to reach its conclusion.

Content analysis, considered an empirical approach, relies on its surveyors reaching the same conclusions about a certain advertisement. It is imperative that a result is given under the same codes and practices, for example, stating what is seen and read and not reading between the lines. In other words not bringing ones own experiences into the act of measurement. Certainly according to Fiske 'the analyst will almost definitely reach their conclusion with the view that gender roles are constructed and not as a consequence of being born male or female'. (Fiske, 1982, p108) If indeed they worked under the auspices of the latter then arguably there would be no debate. One of the ways to measure advertisings categorisation of men and women is to look at a particular role traditionally carried out by either sex. Leiss uses the example of occupation in which she uses it to

‘test the divergence in the presentation of men and women’. (Leiss, 1990, p220) This would involve looking at a series of picture adverts over a given time and recording the occupational roles men and women are portraying. Once the results are established there would apparently be a clearer picture of how men and women are seen in their gendered occupational roles. This may well give an indication of women being depicted in positions deemed less important to men thereby stereotyping them to some lesser role. However counting how many times someone is seen in a certain situation may not be sufficient in concluding that adverts or advertisers reinforce gender stereotypes. Indeed Sumner argues that there is too much importance placed on repeatability and not enough emphasis on what the significance of an advert has for the viewer. He states ‘content analysis does not pose questions about the meaning of items therefore it has no understandable context’. (Sumner, 1979, p69) By stating this Sumner is suggesting that as social beings we bring with us, in our interpretation of adverts certain values and belief systems- albeit learned- depending on social background resulting in an assumption that viewers are unable to see anything other than what is in front of them. It is true that advertisers would agree there exists within adverts a preferred reading, however that may not be how the viewer interprets it. This preferred reading also allows the viewer to disagree and possibly take offence at the message being promoted intentionally or otherwise.

Another criticism aimed at this method, is that it assumes women are part of a homogeneous group and that they share a common idea of how women in particular should be represented in advertising. This criticism has also been levelled at feminist

research and brings to the fore debates on positive imagery. However when considering feminist interpretations of gender stereotyping it is worth bearing in mind that although this movement wish to see a fairer more positive representation of women in advertising the question of whose ideology of fairness would be represented.

Nonetheless being able to establish gender stereotyping within advertising is, as many commentators would argue going to take more than counting the times an image is represented. Indeed Leiss suggests that within content analysis of advertising ‘the real weakness may lie in the use of denotative-what you see- measurement as opposed to connotation-what you infer-and its many levels of meaning’, as used in many of today’s picture adverts. (Leiss, 1990, p224) One of the ways one can interpret what is not seen within an advert and its text is through the use of semiotics.

Within the Semiological method of analysis there is a need to focus on the messages given off by advertisers, whether intentional or not, to see if messages can be inferred in a way the advertisers did not intend. Semiology or the ‘science of signs’-a term first coined by Ferdinand De Saussure, a Swiss linguist-works by breaking an advert down into different sections and in doing so one can build up a picture of other interpretations beyond what is seen or read. In recent times there has debatably been a move away from simple text describing the meaning of a picture to a more cryptic style of messaging. It is because of this shift we have seen the development of Semiotics. What we see in Today’s adverts is not a description of the image but a shift in that the text has become an aid to the picture on view. ‘Nelson tells us that advertising doesn’t reflect how people are acting

but how they are dreaming'. (1983, p10) What this is trying to achieve is stimulation or a reshaping of what we already have in our minds. In other words it could be argued here that adverts are reinforcing what people already know or imagine what they know therefore if we see the social world as stereotypical then adverts will reflect this. Conversely if it is interpreted as a social norm then a different reading of the advert will be received altogether. This is where the use of Semiotics can help with the understanding of how meaning is reconstructed by advertisers and the buying public.

The concept behind this method is concerned with signs and in particular three different component parts, signified, signifier and sign. To help in the explanation of these terms it will be useful to examine a recent advert taken from a popular magazine. One such advert within a current publication of OK magazine illustrates a woman smiling having used a certain brand of washing powder to clean clothes; the headline states 'Another load of your mind'. (OK, 2002, p65) Within this particular advert the signifier would be the washing powder. The signified however would relate to the headline as another job done, whereas the sign would suggest that washing powder equals happy family with clean clothes, time to do other jobs around the house and it's a mothers job to worry about dirty washing. However if this is the meaning then how was it arrived at because this particular advert does not state what is conveyed above. It may be that semiotics recognises that viewers interact with material presented, they do not just take it at face value, and they bring other meanings they may have encountered elsewhere in the social world. Indeed in support of this argument Kline tells us that for 'advertising to create meaning the observer has to do some work'. (Kline, 1990, p202) Without denying this advert could

have different signs for different individuals there may be a case here whereby advertisers are not reinforcing gender stereotypes, it is the reader bringing their own social background or life experience to the reading of the advertisement therefore reinforcing their own stereotypes. Williamson makes the point that although people 'invent adverts these adverts do not claim to speak for them'. (Williamson, 1978, p13) Therefore the interpretations individuals bring may be governed by codes and constraints within our social lives that may well affect the way adverts are constructed and presented

Ideology is a code that is arguably influential on how adverts are put together and can change over time. For example if one looks at advertising of the 40s and 50s there was possibly many more obvious signs of hierarchy between the sexes. Indeed in many of the adverts used by Goffman in his gender advertisements publication, men were seen as breadwinners working outside of the home and women were seen as homemakers and carers with no indication of an occupation. Incidentally he defines ideology as a 'meaning made necessary by the conditions of society while helping to perpetuate those conditions. In other words leading people to believe certain values to gain agreement in an objective, in this case gender roles. (Goffman, 1979, p28-82) To reiterate this position Winship takes the argument a stage further and states that it is the 'ideology of patriarchy with its structures of domination that sets up inequality'. (Winship, 1980, p17) so for Winship there is an influence of a ruling ideology that affects many facets of social life- beauty, sexuality and independence etc- that advertisers are bound to use because within that ruling ideology, society would expect or demand different roles from individuals

therefore advertisers would reflect this. If however advertisers and individuals are constrained by a ruling ideology that again suggests that individuals have lost or never had the ability to think for themselves. Indeed akin to a hypodermic model whereby people are injected-metaphorically speaking- with information that does not get processed and comes out exactly as it went in.

Gender stereotyping in advertising is therefore very subjective in that whatever way we measure and analyse the subject it must be stressed that we have the ability to disagree with any message that is conveyed by advertisers. Through the use of semiotics we can build up a picture of what is behind the images we are confronted with. By the same degree content analysis can give one the idea that the result is conclusive. However no method is perfect and in the same way it can be useful it can also be misleading as has been shown above. When one is also faced with the argument of ideology within advertising it is akin with all aspects of social life. It is true to say we follow rules and regulation in our every day social lives that may constrain some of our actions, in the same way that advertisers are constrained by bodies such as the BSC. However in the same way we are constrained, we are also protected by the same ideology, therefore we have some powers available to disagree with, contest and challenge messages or actions deemed unfair or stereotypical. As a result it is difficult to establish whether adverts reinforce gender stereotypes or if indeed we do that perfectly well for ourselves.



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