

The Portrayal of Women in Advertising: Reflection or Creation of Values?

Assignment #7

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Communicating to the masses has evolved over time. What began as limited and basic exposure has developed into a complex stream of messages that surrounds us in every aspect of our daily lives. Studies have shown that the mass communications we are constantly exposed to play an important part in shaping our attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and expectations of the world around us.

As researchers attempt to study and explain how mass communication affects our society, advertising becomes a popular source for study. Although its messages may be short, they are often powerful, persuasive, and influential in shaping the attitude and behavior of consumers.

As women have crossed the boundary from the domestic sphere to the professional arena, expectations and representations of women have changed as well. Further, in some discourses, the stereotypic character traits attributed to women have shifted from weak and dependent to strong and autonomous (Kates, Shaw-Garlock 1999).

Through the years, advertising has changed its themes to ‘move with the times.’ Emma Bannister, Marie Clare beauty editor stated, “The real emerging trend is the strength of the female portrayed: they still show gorgeous girls but they are presented as stronger and it’s about doing it for yourself” (Bainbridge, 1996).

This research paper is going to focus on the portrayal of women in advertisements and whether or not those depictions reflect the values of women in American society.

The advertising industry seems to have taken a giant leap from portraying women as submissive homemakers to independent and business savvy career women. Previous

research attributes this change in advertising plot to Northrop Frye's taxonomy of mythoi. Insofar as advertising is considered "mythologizing," precise information about mythic plots, heroes, and values enables better matching of myths and target markets. Often, this involves updating the mythic material to reflect cultural changes (Stern, 1995).

SIGNIFICANCE

The topic of the portrayal of women in advertising is significant in the social realm. The dominance of advertising in our lives and its ability to persuade and shape our beliefs give it power over our society and the influence of our basic thoughts.

Advertising attempts to put forth an image of ideals to be obtained by society. The ideals they portray do not necessarily reflect society but may influence people's beliefs about the world outside of their immediate environment. This concept is discussed in Cultivation Theory. This theory states that what is repeatedly seen in the mass media shapes perceptions of social reality. This is significant to society because mass communication leads its receivers to believe what is untrue.

Advertising is frequently studied to explain its effect on self-image and standards of beauty but rarely examines how it connects with the terminal and instrumental values of the consumers it supposedly represents.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Because this research focuses primarily on values, it is important to fully understand the definition of "value" as it is applied to this study.

Value: An enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance. (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5)

RESEARCH QUESTION

This research will attempt to answer two questions. First, how are women portrayed in print advertisements? For example, what are their values, what roles are they portrayed in, and whom, if anyone, are they shown with? The second question asks how does this portrayal compare to the actual values of women in America?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To best examine this subject the researcher will use two theories drawn from the Mechanistic and Sociological framework of theories. The first to be examined will be Cultivation Theory and the second, Social Expectation Theory.

CULTIVATION THEORY

Cultivation Theory was developed by George Gerbner in 1979. The basic principles of this theory state that media affect audience perceptions of the world outside of their immediate environment. It also suggests that repeated exposures to consistent media portrayals influence our perceptions of the social reality including people, objects, and environments.

For the purpose of this study, Cultivation Theory helps to explain how the mass media, in this case advertising, causes the often-inaccurate perceptions of the world outside of the viewer's immediate environment. Consumers most likely perceive society to be reflected by advertisements because advertising should be most effective when it

appeals to the values and characteristics of its consumers. This general belief, supported by the principles of cultivation theory, falls under question in this research as the correlation between the values of American women and the values portrayed in advertisements is examined.

SOCIAL EXPECTATION THEORY

Social Expectation Theory stems from the American Sociological group of theories. This theory attempts to explain how social expectations are created through portrayals of norms, roles, rankings and sanctions in media content. It proposes that although media portrayals may or may not be authentic, audiences assimilate the definitions of patterns of social behavior and develop expectations of social groups.

In this research, Social Expectation Theory provides the framework for establishing how women perceive the values important to other women. From these perceptions women may be influenced as to which values they hold important for themselves.

METHODOLOGY

This research will employ survey and a quantitative method of content analysis to discover findings.

For the first part of this study, a survey will be created and distributed to a random sample of female college students. The participants will answer basic demographic questions and participate in Value Survey, which was created by Rokeach (1973). The results of the survey will provide comprehensive results that can be tabulated and examined for trends.

For the second portion of the research, content analysis will be used to examine print advertisements from the top five most frequently read magazines noted from the women surveyed. The researcher will examine each advertisement portraying a woman in the issues of three consecutive months surrounding the time the survey of women is conducted. The implied values, depicted roles, and social interactions of the women will be classified and recorded so that the trend of characteristics can be examined and compared to actual importance of values of the women sampled. This comparison will prove or disprove the correlation between the social realities presented in advertisements and the actual values of the sample of women.

The result of this comparison will either strengthen or argue against both the Cultivation Theory and the Social Expectation Theory.

OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURE

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. Chapter one will cover the statement of the problem, its significance, research questions, justification, and the definition of the terms presented in the next chapters.

Chapter two will be a review of literature to examine studies that have been performed on topics similar to the depiction of women in advertising and how the values presented in advertisements correlate with actual values of women in America. It will also examine the methodology chosen and the theories that will be used to explain the social phenomena.

The third chapter of this thesis will explain what the researcher found when examining advertisements depicting women. It will examine the content of

characteristics and values associated with women and will present this information in a table of findings and a discussion of results.

The fourth chapter will explain the reasoning and methods behind the creation and format of the survey and the random sample surveyed. Results of this survey will also be discussed in this chapter.

Finally, chapter five will be a discussion of findings of this study including a comparison between the actual values noted and the advertising content. This chapter will also discuss limitations of the study and recommendations for future research in this area.

CHAPTER II - LITERATURE REVIEW

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the related literature that will include articles related to the study of advertising, how advertising influences society's perceptions, how women are portrayed in advertisements, and images presented in women's magazines. It will also examine the theoretical framework that will be used for the study presented in this research paper.

RATIONALE OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK USED

The researcher chose to use Cultivation Theory and Social Expectation Theory for the basis of this research paper to help examine how advertisements affect viewer perceptions and perhaps even their personal perspectives on what values are important in their lives.

Cultivation Theory gives reasoning for how viewers create often-inaccurate perceptions of the world outside of the viewers' immediate environment. Applied to the purpose of this study, it will help the researcher create a link between values chosen as important by subjects and media portrayals of women.

Social Expectation Theory will assist this research in explaining why society's perception of the social reality will influence their ranking of roles and values they hold as important. This theory sets the foundation that audiences develop definitions of behavioral patterns for different social groups through what is presented to them through

media portrayals and from those portrayals they develop social expectations for members of society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

CULTIVATION THEORY

As previously stated, the basic principles of Cultivation Theory state that media affect audience perceptions of the world outside of their immediate environment. It also suggests that repeated exposures to consistent media portrayals influence our perceptions of the social reality including people, objects, and environments.

According to George Gerbner and colleagues, television is responsible for a major 'cultivating' and 'acculturating' process, according to which people are exposed systematically to a selective view of society on almost every aspect of life, a view which tends to shape their beliefs and values accordingly (McQuail, 1994).

To illustrate the principles of this theory we can examine social and economic divides in our culture. For example, women who act as homemakers may feel that they know the values and characteristics of women who seek careers in the professional world and may perceive them as very different from their own. Although they may not experience interaction with these women, through media representations they create a perception of the social system outside of their immediate environment. This perception of social reality may seem as real and accurate to them as if they had experienced this other social group in their immediate environment.

Cultivation Theory has provided an excellent tool for researchers attempting to examine mediated experiences presented by mass communication. It gives researchers

the strong theoretical framework necessary to position their studies and link media content to its affect on society. However, as McQuail (1994) noted, Cultivation Theory tends to explain rather too much of what has seemed to happen to (North American) society in modern times, and it cannot be tested, except mentally, but it sheds some extra light on the meaning of the ‘mediation of experience’.

Another weakness under consideration as the Cultivation Theory is applied to shape the research study is the fact that some participants in the study will not actively seek information or entertainment from magazines. This weakness should not have an effect on this research as other media content reflects values very similar to those found in magazines. The consistent similarity of values portrayed in each marketing campaign, even those presented in several forms of media, is necessary to establish and maintain a brand image. According to Goldman and Papson (1996), no cultural analysis of advertising today can ignore the mercurial process of recombining meaning systems in order to generate additional value and desirability for brand-name commodities. We view advertising as a system of sign values. A sign value establishes the relative value of a brand where the functional difference between products is minimal.

SOCIAL EXPECTATION THEORY

The second theory applied to this research question is Social Expectation Theory. Social Expectation Theory stems from the American Sociological group of theories. This theory attempts to explain how social expectations are created through portrayals of norms, roles, rankings and sanctions in media content. It proposes that although media

portrayals may or may not be authentic, audiences assimilate the definitions of patterns of social behavior and develop social expectations of social groups.

This theory will assist the researcher in examining society's expectations of the characteristics and attributes they think are important to women in American society. Through their perceptions of the values and characteristics of women from media portrayals, the viewing public links specific traits and personality characteristics to that specific social group. These behavior links cause them to create expectations of what values are important to other women and may influence the choice of values they hold important to themselves.

A group of researchers from Princeton University presented what has been called the "transactional view" of perception. This view essentially means that both the perceiver and the world are active participants in an act of perception (Toch and MacLean, 1962). The transactional thinkers have demonstrated through their research that perception is based on assumptions. Americans' assumptions of society, specifically women, come largely from statistics and informational media content on the changing society presented in news and media portrayals.

Over the past decades researchers have done countless studies on the shift of the domestic housewife and mother to the independent workingwoman. Society has noted the progression of this shift through the mass media as well as through history books and workforce statistics. The "transactional view" of perception used with Social Expectation Theory assists in explaining that society's assumption of the change in the values of women is directly connected to the way in which media, and advertising specifically, have portrayed this shift in society and the characteristics of women in America.

Social Expectation Theory may prove to have weaknesses when applied to this research question. The principles of this theory will apply less to members of society who are not heavily exposed to media content as the theory relies heavily on constantly portrayed images in the mass media. Another weakness will be similar to that mentioned for Cultivation Theory as some participants in the study will not actively expose themselves to the media form under examination. These weaknesses should both be minimized by the fact that images presented in all types of media are congruent as marketing strategies and images for each product or service remain constant through various forms of media for the purpose of a strong brand image.

RESEARCH OR STUDIES, TOPIC RELATED

Research regarding advertising has been approached from many different perspectives using various theoretical frameworks. As the researcher reviewed previous studies and literature, several patterns emerged.

EVOLUTION OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

The first pattern discovered was the evolving portrayal of women in advertising. Many research articles have focused on how depictions of women in advertising reflect their changing roles in business, politics and society. Many of these research studies use content analysis to reveal the transition in social roles. An article by Jan Kurtz in USA Today stated “Advertising has shifted women’s image whenever the need to create a market called for it (Kurtz, 1997). Some of the themes she found predominant in her study of advertisements she noted as the “24-hour woman” (emerged in the 1920s as the

flapper) who for her age, gender, childbearing, and finite hours in a day are the excuses of lesser mortals for not reaching self-actualization; the woman who “has it all” (reaching her heyday in the 1980s); the “independent woman” (sporadically through decades but a dominant image in the 1990s); others include the “love tutor”, “failed” women, sex kittens, potential lovers, and of course the homemaker who has been a stable figure for decades.

Other researchers examine where the evolution has reached at this point. An article from U.S. News & World Report states “Alas, we are in the presence of yet another advertising trend: the new bristling, confrontational Madison Avenue woman. “Attitude” is on, often accompanied by a dose of naughty male-bashing” (Leo, 1993).

Some researchers are not confident that this latest evolution is positive for women and their self-images. The recent profusion of TV, films, and ads portraying women and girls as physically tough and verbally assertive may not be much healthier for girls and young women than images of homemaker stereotypes, reports the Los Angeles Times (Finnegan, 2001).

SEX-ROLES PRESENTED IN THE MEDIA

Another group of research examines the difference in sex-roles portrayed through the media. Previous research shows that men were more likely to be portrayed in an occupational setting and that women were more likely to be portrayed at home (Furnham, Babitzkow & Ugucioni 2000). Studies in several countries have found similar findings and although advertisers may deviate from this positioning from time to time, these traditional portrayals continue to show their theme.

A study done in Denmark concluded that although the present data show a shift away from authoritarian portrayal, such a trend does not necessarily imply that women and men are not being portrayed in their stereotypic gender roles (Furnham, Babitzkow & Uguccioni 2000). The advertisement agencies may be emphasizing the role of men portrayed as dependent only to establish a general change in people's perceptions of gender roles. For example, having a man act as a spouse, parent, sex object, or homemaker creates an effect of differentiation between the various brands, which has been suggested to be the most important variable for persuasion in advertisements (Steward & Furse, 1986).

CHANGING ADVERTISING PORTRAYALS TO APPEAL TO FEMALE CONSUMERS

A third body of research takes a look at how advertisers change their strategies and portrayals of women to create a greater impact and appeal for the female consumer. A survey done by the Ogilvy and Mather advertising agency found that women prefer advertisements that have intelligent characters and plot development that results in a feeling of emancipation. Their research showed that women have outgrown ad land's stereotypes.

A study done by the Big Green Door offers insight for advertisers into the needs of advertising for female consumers. They found that women respond to advertising differently than men. They pay far greater attention to detail, are more sensitive to tone and look at it with greater depth. While men look for the joke and then move on, women are more interested in the characters and what they mean (Nicholas, 1994).

Colgate Palmolive carried out a research study of their own to find out how female consumers felt about their advertising strategies. It found that many ads targeting

women consumers were irritating the consumer rather than persuading her to buy their products. They found that women are looking for something other than glamour and that women most liked to chat with their female friends and power dressing was no longer important. As a result of these findings, Colgate Palmolive embarked on a new ad campaign centering on a 'girls-talk' theme that focus on real women in familiar situations, to give the audience a 'slice of life' feel (Bainbridge, 1996).

IMAGES PRESENTED IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

Finally, research was found focusing on the different images presented in women's magazines. For example, one study examined sexualized imagery as power in advertising. Its discussion focused on semiotic signifiers and how advertising and programming provide some of the social cues in the construction of self. It argued that girls negotiate and construct their own gendered identities through different definitions of what it means to be a woman from the media (Baldwin, 1999).

Another performed a content analysis of the roles, attributes, and occupations of main characters depicted in the magazines. In this article discussion focused on stereotypical portrayals in women's magazine fiction and found that the fiction that exists in today's magazines is, in many ways, as traditional as has been found in the past. It stated that perhaps of little consequence by themselves, stereotypical portrayals contribute to a continued stereotypical view of the world through the media (Peirce, 1997).

A third article examined women's interpretations of fashion photographs in popular women's fashion magazines. It stated that younger women are said to view images identified with hegemonic femininity not as signs of weakness and passivity in

women but as indications of being “in control” of their sexuality (Crane, 1999). It discussed how subtle meanings are embedded in photographs by the way the subject is posed or the clothing itself and attributed the incorporation of oppositional elements in advertisements to the need to hold the attention of increasingly sophisticated consumers.

RESEARCH QUESTION FORMATION

This research will attempt to answer two questions. First, how are women portrayed in print advertisements? For example, what are their values, what roles are they portrayed in, and whom, if anyone, are they shown with? The second question asks how does this portrayal compare to the actual values of women in America?

Based on previous research, these research questions will attempt to fill an information gap that exists between the study of portrayals of women in advertising and if advertisements actually reflect the values of women in America. To date, few studies examine the correlation of values between women in society and the modern women portrayed in advertisements. Previous research has focused primarily on the image of the housewife and homemaker.

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY CHAPTER

The purpose of this study is to examine the co relationship between values found in print advertisements and those of the women in America. The following chapter will discuss the methodology to be adopted, research design, research instruments employed and the research procedures followed.

METHODOLOGY TO BE ADOPTED

The researcher will employ the use of survey and content analysis to discover the patterns of advertising representations and compare them to the actual values and characteristics of women in America.

The first part of this study will be conducted using survey as a research tool. Survey can be conducted as both a quantitative and qualitative research method and uses a selected sample of people to represent a larger population. Survey will allow the researcher to gain knowledge of how women in America describe their own values and characteristics. Each of the research subjects will respond to a questionnaire according to their individual characteristics and interests. Initial questions asked will inquire about age, ethnicity and what magazines the participant reads. For the second part of the survey the subject will be asked to participate in Value Survey. Value Survey concentrates on terminal and instrumental values. Rokeach (1973) states that instrumental and terminal values are related, yet they are separately organized into relatively enduring hierarchical organizations along a continuum of importance. For this survey each participant will be asked to arrange a group of 18 instrumental values and a

group of 18 terminal values (presented on individual cards) in the order of importance to her, according to her individualized value systems. By presenting the subject with individual cards noting the values to be categorized, instead of a list in which to rank them, she can more easily conceptualize and arrange them according to her internal value system. Because the responses are not from external stimulus characteristics or pre-conceived categorical answers respondents are able to express themselves and thus reveal their subjective thought, providing more accurate and reliable results.

Once the surveys are finished and collected, the individual responses will be tabulated and examined for patterns and findings. The researcher will be looking for trends as to which values are most important to the women sampled.

The method of survey allows the researcher to collect a good amount and wide variety of information in a quick and effective method. The questions and methods provided allow for clear answers that can be quantitatively examined to expose a variety of patterns and connections.

Like any research method, survey has its weaknesses. One challenge encountered when using survey is collecting completed questionnaires because the return rate is usually very low. For this research, surveys will not be mailed, but rather handed out so the subjects can immediately complete the questions and hand the survey back to the researcher.

Another problem encountered when using survey for research is the tendency of participants to not read directions or the entire question before answering. The survey designed for this study does not include difficult or lengthy questions and does not call

for extensive directions so participants should not be confused and should be able to give accurate answers without too much time and effort spent on question comprehension.

For the second part of the research, content analysis will be used to examine and record portrayals of women found in magazine advertisements. The sample to be used will be drawn from the top five most frequently read magazines noted by the women surveyed. A period of three consecutive months will be used, centering around the time the survey data is collected. This time frame will provide current information and will eliminate the possibility of a change in values that could result if the research was conducted during two separate time periods.

The researcher will examine the implied values of the women presented in the advertisements, the settings they are portrayed in and the social interactions presented in the situations. Bernard Berelson gave the classical definition of content analysis. He stated, "Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952). This research technique will allow the researcher to translate the media images into categories of content that can then be tabulated and examined.

Weaknesses can be found in content analysis if the researcher does not maintain a consistent and accurate analysis of the media content. However, if the content is carefully examined and categories are clear, the analysis is an effective and accurate research tool. In advertising, content analysis has been intensively used to study the values communicated in one specific society (Pollay, 1985). For this study, content analysis will provide the tool for studying values associated with women by advertisers. The same categories for classification will be applied to each research sample and the

researcher will take every necessary step to classify the information in a uniform and accurate manner.

When using content analysis, the researcher must also be careful not to allow any biases to influence their determination of content. This analysis will remain systematic and objective following proper procedures and giving each item an equal examination and categorization.

RESEARCH DESIGN

For the first part of this research project the researcher will use a handout survey to poll a sample of the population of women in America. This sample will be limited to the Midwest and will focus on female college students. Participants will be chosen randomly.

Each participant will be asked to complete the survey and arrange the two sets of cards in order from most important to least important to them. The technique of allowing them to physically and visually arrange the values provides for a more accurate response to the question. The information and rankings collected will be recorded and examined for patterns for future use in comparison with the results of the content analysis.

For the content analysis portion of this study the researcher will examine the advertisements in the magazine sample collected that contain an image of at least one woman.

To classify the content the researcher will use the list of 18 instrumental values as well as the Rokeach Value Survey to assign meaning to and classify the content of each

advertisement. Once the values portrayed in the advertisements have been classified, the results will be tabulated and examined for patterns and trends.

While examining the advertisements, the researcher will also note other key information including the roles the women are shown in, the setting depicted in the advertisement, their ethnicity, and if the women are shown by themselves or with others and if with other people, who those people are.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The following are the survey questions and a listing of the values that will be given to the participants on individual cards.

What magazines do you read?

What is your age?

What is your ethnicity?

18 Instrumental Values

- Ambitious (hard-working, aspiring)
- Broadminded (open-minded)
- Capable (competent, effective)
- Cheerful (lighthearted, joyful)
- Clean (neat, tidy)
- Courageous (standing up for your beliefs)
- Forgiving (willing to pardon others)
- Helpful (working for the welfare of others)
- Honest (sincere, truthful)
- Imaginative (daring, creative)
- Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient)
- Intellectual (Intelligent, reflective)
- Logical (consistent, rational)
- Loving (affectionate, tender)
- Obedient (dutiful, respectful)
- Polite (courteous, well-mannered)

- Responsible (dependable, reliable)
- Self-controlled (restrained, self-disciplined)

18 Terminal Values

- A comfortable life (a prosperous life)
- An exciting life (a stimulating, active life)
- A sense of accomplishment (lasting contribution)
- A world at peace (free of war and conflict)
- A world of beauty (beauty of nature and the arts)
- Equality (brotherhood, equal opportunity for all)
- Family security (taking care of loved ones)
- Freedom (independence, free choice)
- Happiness (contentedness)
- Inner Harmony (freedom from inner conflict)
- Mature love (sexual and spiritual intimacy)
- National security (protection from attack)
- Pleasure (an enjoyable, leisurely life)
- Salvation (saved, eternal life)
- Self-respect (self-esteem)
- Social recognition (respect, admiration)
- True friendship (close companionship)
- Wisdom (a mature understanding of life)

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The first part of this research will begin with the printing of several hundred questionnaires and several sets of cards to be distributed to a sample of women. The researcher will then seek out a random sample of women to fill out these questionnaires. Once the researcher has collected a sufficient number of surveys, the results will be organized and tabulated to examine the findings and patterns.

The second step in conducting this research will be to collect the sample of the five women's magazines to examine. Once the sample has been collected the researcher will examine the content of the advertisements in the magazines and record the values and characteristics portrayed in each ad containing at least one woman. Once all of the

data has been collected the results will be organized and examined for trends and patterns.

When both of these research steps are completed the researcher will compare the results of the content analysis to the findings of the survey to establish if the advertisements accurately reflect the values of women in America.

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