“Portrayal of Women in Advertising”

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“The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source.”

-Lucretia Mott

Abstract

This research paper presents a content analysis of the evolution of advertising’s portrayal of women focusing on print and television media. The paper is written to show the credibility of the sources that were found and use them to better understand the stereotypes and opportunities for women in the advertising world, both in print and television advertisements. The study will include the history of women in advertisement, some of the most influential women, and how they have been portrayed in the same manner for the past 50 or more years. Many women are exploited and used as objects to sell and endorse products. Many examples of using sex appeal for print or television media will also be discussed in the paper. This paper will also include the harsh effects of the media on women that demands conformity and in order to conform to the damaging stereotypical image that women are use to seeing. This paper will also include a hypothesis following a content analysis stating the methodology of the subject, which will explain the portrayal of women in advertising and provide a graph to furthermore, supplement the statistical analysis.

Introduction
Advertising is a well-known and important part of the marketing world for any business. Advertising companies raise and spend in millions of dollars each year from creating new ideas and selling campaigns. Many hours are put into creativity and developing each print ad we see every day in magazines, billboards, television ads, etc. Advertisement designers want to make their work meaningful to their viewers so that they can relate to these ads and purchase the items they are trying to sell. This works best when people in their advertisements are relatable such as celebrities, athletes, politicians, etc. (Cuneen et all, 2007).

During the past 60 years, when television ads have been broadcasting, many scholarly articles have been published and many documentaries made, claiming on the unfair portrayal of women and men in advertising. Although recent studies have shown that the portrayal of women in advertisements has gotten a lot better recent analyses have still shown that television media portrays women the same way in the past. These stations include ones such as prime time and MTV which air commercials that still depict women commonly holding jobs and engaging in behaviors that remain stereotypical (Stern 2004). Studies have also shown that older women in their late 60’s are less likely to be in commercials as much as men in their late 60’s and that young boys are more likely to appear in commercials that air during cartoons than young girls their age. (Stern 2004). When women are shown in stereotypical gender roles, they are usually portrayed as younger and fresh looking, and not the common middle aged women that is seen everyday. Due to the frequent playing of young women in advertisements young women have created the foundation for the accepted role of genders in commercials (Stern 2004).

**Selling Women in Advertisements**
Research has shown that advertising can manipulate and distort images of women in the media, to create a stereotype of women as sex objects. It has also been proven that men almost always appear fully clothed while women are constantly portrayed as wearing less clothing, which comes back to the issue of women being portrayed more as sex objects than men.

Throughout the past forty years, the representation of sexuality in advertisements has grown a lot, especially for women. This is due to the high levels of “themes and behaviors” (Courtney & Edison) we see in the media every day.

It started in the 1850’s when advertising company’s use-to-use sexual imagery of women in their advertisements to sell products. For example, many tobacco companies would use women in their ads to sell products, and the women would be totally nude. As time went on models in advertising began to become more and more explicit sexually usually with women. Also contact between models male and female, has become more explicit in advertising also suggesting sexual acts. Most of these ads are seen in many women and men’s magazines as opposed to Newsweek or Time. The media believes that since women and men are seeing unrealistic views of women in romantic shows and
marriage than women and men will start to believe that that is how women are supposed to be portrayed in real life as sexual objects. When consumers are constantly seeing images of women portrayed in the media as sex than that is how the image of women will stay in their heads.

Over the past 100 years, women have been the main targets of consumers. (Levy and Jane 2006). Women are the ones spending the money in the household and buying most of the consumer products. Advertisers reach women in a lot of different ways but mostly through advertisements in magazines. Although women are the main consumers of products, advertising companies do not portray women in a powerful way but more as the dependant on the male in their lives or showing low cost items to buy such as laundry detergent and cosmetics while men are portrayed as more of a powerful type in ads and selling non domestic items such as cars or cameras (Stern 2004).

Examples of women in advertising also continue to how they are portrayed in fashion magazines such as Vogue. The models in their ads are mostly dressed in scantily clad outfits and either embracing a man for support, turning away from him shyly, or in a pose that depicts sexual acts (Levy and Jane 2006).

Women mostly have ads that sell beauty and clothes in their magazines and not other ads such as ones that promote examples of new technology or innovation. These types of ads are typically only seen in male magazines. Other ads in women magazines usually involve diet strategies and pills, which give women an unrealistic image of what society wants them to look like. Advertisers come up with products for women to see in their magazines, which they read for advice, which could promote women to buy these products to make them feel better about themselves. If a women sees a certain pair of jeans in magazine that will make them “look skinnier” than they will go out and buy them. Girls will also try to emulate the images of women in these magazines whether it is their hair, makeup, clothes, or even weight. The idea that most consumers don’t focus
on is the photo shopping in these magazines. Not even real models look like these pictures we see in magazines. Pictures are constantly warped and giving women and girls’ unrealistic views of beauty in society. These images lead to constant low self-esteem, eating disorders, and debt. (Nigham and Jha 2007).

The greatest challenge is trying to get advertising companies to change their ways of promoting stereotypes(Levy and Jane 2006). Through educating the public about these problems, with positive advertisements such as the Dove commercials which promote every day women in normal sizes, we can promote healthy self-estees in women and make these sexual images a thing of the past.

**Killing Us Slowly With Advertisements**

Most of the ads on TV sell us values and images (Kilbourne; “Killing Us Softly 4”). They show us feelings as well that can make us sad, happy, and fearful, etc. Women come up with the theory of “how we look” and what is the ideal female beauty is. Most models in magazines are extremely photo shopped and women feel pressured to measure up to these unrealistic images of women. Most of the women girls and women look up to are tall slender blonde white women with blue eyes. Women of other ethnicities are forced to fit that criteria and lighten their skin.
Men also play a part in the role of women due to advertisements. Men judge women in real life based on what they see in advertisements, the unrealistic photo-shopped images. Men then tend to see women as things instead of people, which can lead to violence when people start thinking of people as objects or things and that they have no feelings (Kilbourne; “Killing Us Softly 4”).

Due to the extremely photo shopped pictures in advertisements there is a greater need for plastic surgery. Plastic surgery has gone up 457% in the past twenty years. The most common forms of plastic surgery are breast augmentations, liposuctions, eyelifts, and botox.

Young girls see these images even in their magazines and soon hit a wall with how they want to look. These problems lead to obsession with looking good and lead to an epidemic of eating disorders in this country. This problem doesn’t just affect young girls it also affects older women who have a fear of aging. Older women feel if they don’t look young then they aren’t desirable and not sexy anymore. These days we also are bombarded with diet pills, which hardly ever work and lead to either more weight gain or even death.

In recent commercials they have even decided to make food sexual; exploiting women in their ads. Women are often seen in passive and vulnerable poses in ads. They also act in juvenile poses of acts of sex. Which can also be perceived as child pornographic-like. They want us to be porn stars (Kilbourne; “Killing Us Softly 4”).

Men never have this problem, even though can be perceived as sexual objects in advertisements because men don’t live in such a world where they are seen as week. Most men’s’ advertisements have an underlying message to be strong, masculine, and not to be feminine in the least. Advertisements do not want to change because they want us
to hate our bodies and ourselves because that is how they profit (Kilbourne; “Killing Us Softly 4”).

**Women in their Setting**

The most common setting for women in television advertisements is in the domestic residence (Stern and Mastro 2004). This image of women is also seen in children’s’ commercials in which there are very few boys- only commercials in a home setting compared to girls only commercials (Stern and Mastro 2004). Men are more likely in general programming to be seen outside the home. Commercials continue to show women only in their own private homes. When consumers see these images of women they assume that women are only limited to their homes while men are able to have a variety of many places they can be (Stern and Mastro 2004).

Specific products are sold to women and men in advertisements as well. Women are more associated with products such as painkillers, body products, feminine products,
and clothing. While men are more associated with cough and cold medicine, computers, and electronics. From a social aspect these products may seem insignificant but they also subtly influence consumers’ attitudes about common stereotypes for women and men, which largely focus on confirming women and their issues that revolved around their homes.

**Gender Appearances, Behaviors, Roles**

Many advertisers have an emphasis on women’s bodies in advertisements and their unnatural and exaggerated beauty standards. When studying MTV’s commercials (Stern and Mastro 2004) found that most women were depicted as having the extremely average bodies that came off as fit and beautiful while most of the men had average bodies. During these commercials women were also portrayed as having skimpy or sexy clothing that were aired during the MTV shows compared to the neutral boring clothing that the men were wearing. The overall picture that these commercials are portraying is that these advertisements are portraying women’s’ bodies as sexual objects that should be used to gain and hold the attention of the viewer (Stern and Mastro 2004). In recent studies show that women are three times as more likely to be perceived as sex objects than men and that women were more likely to appear in submissive and alluring ways while it’s the opposite for men (Stern and Mastro 2004). As for commercials that show
men and women in them, men have always had the upper hand in commercials that show men and women in the workplace. Men are more shown in professional jobs such as doctors or lawyers while women are more shown in a domestic view such as cooking in the kitchen or doing house cleaning. This goes to show that women are more shown as not having an occupation than men. Studies have also proven that although women use electronic devices such as computers and cameras as much as men the female role in commercials is hardly ever seen as business professionals. These roles play an important part in society because in our culture today the average person wants to be seen as having a high level of energy and strength. Unfortunately for women they are hardly ever shown that way with having little or no strength and power in advertisements, half as likely as male actors in commercials (Stern and Mastro 2004).

**Women Endorsers in Advertisements**

(Tennis player Maria Sharapova in Canon ad)
Advertisements are created in order to hit consumers’ on a personal level by showing characters or actors that are relatable to the viewer. This relatability makes the consumer want to buy the product more. The most influential kind of endorser is the athlete because fans relate to them; they are extremely likable and easily recognizable. This makes the consumer able to relate to the product more when they can connect with the person endorsing it. This means positive expected future profits for a company when they choose a celebrity athlete endorser (Ross 2009). Millions of dollars are paid to the athlete and even more billions of dollars are spent to connect the athlete to the company. Unfortunately these endorsements are usually given to men athletes. A study has shown that only 3% of athletic endorsers that were employed by companies and in commercials were female. Although this is such a small number female endorsers are on the rise as women’s’ sports grow and companies start to look for more positive athletic role models.

It is widely believed in the marketing and advertising industries that there is a significant link between the persuasiveness of a message and the character of the spokesperson (Ross 2009). Advertisers use a 15-item scale with three distinct dimensions including expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise includes experience, knowledge, skills, etc. Trustworthiness includes dependability, honest, reliable, sincere, etc. The last dimension has more to do with the female endorser, which is the attractiveness aspect. Advertisers look at if the person is classy, handsome/beautiful, elegant, sexy, etc. All three of these dimensions ad to the influence of the overall message that the company is trying to convey.

Research has found that attractive and feminine athletes are the ones that gain more endorsers than those of female athletes that are less attractive and less feminine. Such endorsers include Anna Kornikova, Maria Sharapova, Danica Patrick, etc. Although these athletes are not really known for their excellent sportsmanship accomplishments, they fit the bill on being attractive and able to sell products successfully (Ross 2009).
Content Analysis

Research Question:

Are women portrayed in advertisements as either sexual objects of men, selling only female products, or using domestic products?

Hypothesis:

The results of this Research Question will indeed show that advertisements that have women in them are clearly explicit when it comes to being sexual objects of men. These advertisements will also show women as being submissive or obeying a man’s needs and/or selling products that women are stereotypically using everyday. These items that are being sold are ones such as women’s products, perfume, cosmetics, and cleaning products.

Methodology:

In order to better identify my units of analysis the method that was used for this content analysis was conceptual analysis because the concept of how women are being portrayed in advertising is being chosen for examination. The portrayal of women is also the sample that was chosen for the research question; “Are women portrayed in advertisements as either sexual objects of men, selling only female products, or using domestic products?” The coding scheme that was also chosen for this content analysis was to scan magazines, commercials, and graphs done in past studies in search for an answer to the research question and to prove that the hypothesis chosen was also correct.

In order to complete this conceptual analysis the Internet was chosen as a source in order to find past studies done on the topic. The topics that were looked at were studies done by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) and Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) who created a graph (See Appendix A) that showed how women were portrayed in
advertisements and what roles were depicted in these advertisements. They studied women from 1958, 1970, and 1983 showing how over time the portrayal of women in advertisements did not really change. And those women were still being portrayed as housewives and not in business savvy form.

Analysis done by myself included looking at television ads broadcasted by MTV in order to look at gender roles that were shown in the advertisements. This analysis also included looking at about 45 ads in the Express Catalogue, looking at about 10 ads in Cosmopolitan magazine, and 10 ads in More magazine.

Unit of Analysis/Discussion:

The units of analysis that were used in this study were looking at studies done by other women who looked at print and television ads showing women actors or models portrayed in them. Other types of communication used for this research would be magazines and their print ads and television ads shown on national television. The types of magazines that were used in this study were “Cosmopolitan” which is geared towards women in their 20’s, “More” which is geared towards women in their 40’s and above, and a recent holiday catalogue collected by the clothing company Express. Televisions ads that I viewed during the week of December 1st at 12pm Eastern Time on the national television channel MTV. The unit of analysis is also going to be the single lead role of the female in each advertisement viewed to avoid problems with identifying who is being analyzed.

After looking at the top 10 commercials shown repeatedly at every commercial break on MTV the following were the top 10:
1. Oral Care toothbrushes: These ads show a woman with a blindfold on so that you can see who she is and then later on steps in a male doctor to provide her with the right toothbrush.

2. Carter’s Jewelry: Involves a queen chess piece throwing jewelry at the king chess piece as he catches them.

3. Salter School: One of the few commercials showing only women in control, holding nursing and massage therapists jobs, and working.

4. Tide: Showing the mother figure in the ad doing laundry

5. HP lap top/ Windows 7: Dr Dre, rap artist, working, and scantily clad women is in the commercial for about three seconds.

6. Cover Girl: although a female product, Drew Barrymore is the spokesperson

7. D & G perfume: Has to be the most sexual ad ever seen with the man undressing the woman and they are both in little to no clothing. Man is also holding the woman as if she is a sexual prize for him. (See Appendix B)

8. Head and Shoulders: Another woman in this ad although usually a man’s product.


10. Army Strong: Targeted to men in college to become officers, no women at all in this commercial.

11. Above the Influence: young boys and girls both shown in this ad but mostly young boys.

12. AT&T phone: Only using phone and man’s voice is the narrator.
Out of these 12 ads the results that are shown from these common commercials are that out of the 12 ads shown only 4 of them were only women, 5 of them were only male, and only 2 of the ads show them both. Other problems found were that only 4 out of the 12 commercials shown show the women with the lead role, 8 out of 12 with men having the lead role and none of the ads show them as equals. They also show that 6 out of 12 commercials viewed showed women cleaning, being sexual or submissive, and only using feminine products while 7 out of the 12 commercials showed men in the strong lead role, again none of them showed that these men and female actors in the commercials were equal. These commercials also only showed women and men who were young, attractive, and thin which doesn’t even cover 1/3 of the United States population.

Magazines ads were almost quite the same although Cosmopolitan is mostly a women for young women between the ages of 18-30. Some ads that were looked at were as follows:

1. Lancôme perfume: shows a woman being held up again a wall by a man in a submissive sexual way.
2. Tampax: Which has been lately showing strong female spokespeople such a Serena Williams who is not always extremely feminine and is also a strong winning competitor in tennis.
3. Platinum Jewelry: Shows the man holding the woman strongly and offering the woman jewelry.
4. Skyy Vodka: This is an interesting ad because it shows the woman holding the bottle and the man being submissive and sexually viewed
rather than the woman since you can only see her hand. Although the man is the sexual object of this ad he is still strong and in good shape. Skyy vodka is usually known for having their women models being sexually explicit in their ads, which makes this one different from the rest.

5. Givenchy Perfume: Main spokesperson for this ad is Justin Timberlake who is holding a pretty model like woman who is a no name. She fits the stereotypical image of what a model in an ad is “supposed” to look like.

These ads clearly show women as some having the upper hand in the ad and some don’t. Either way the message is that sex sells and that is what Cosmopolitan is really going for when they choose their ads. The ads vary from women having the lead role and men having the lead role. The new generation of ads is starting to show women in a more strong confident style rather than being the submissive sexual desire of men. Cosmopolitan is also recognized for having many sexual photos of men in their magazine as well as women. Although More magazine is a magazine targeted more towards women in there 40’s and above, the magazine seemed to have the same types of advertisements in them accept less explicit as Cosmopolitan magazine. The ads were still for beauty, cleaning supplies, and perfume but still offered the same messages and the same stick skinny models portrayed in them.

Looking at the advertisements for the Express catalogue the models were all the same, extremely good looking, thin, tall, and young. They show off the clothes well but still continue to not show anyone that reaches the huge demographic that this
country has for its average weight and height. This leads young women and men to see these images and think that they have to conform to these looks in order to feel beautiful or handsome in this country.

Results

The results of this analysis have proven that my hypothesis was neither wrong nor right. The Hypothesis stated that women are presented in a submissive sexual way or they are shown as either endorsers of cleaning products or feminine products. Although the study of Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) showed that women are seen as being homebodies and that their only job is being the stereotypical stay at home mother or the submissive sexual desire of men. This study was done in 1983 making it a little out dated. Examining the commercials and ads that are in magazines and on television today make it clear that although they are not equal yet, men and women have come a long way from the 50’s through the 80’s in advertisements making it perfectly ok for a woman to be in power in some advertisements. Although we do not see women that often in strong lead roles we do however see them in these types of roles in products that have to with femininity such as the Tampax ad with Serena Williams. Not a very big change for gender roles, but still nonetheless a change.

The major crime here is that sex sells and for women to be seen as sexy they need to be seen as sex objects while men are see the strong masculine type to over throw women. Companies will also have a harder time hiring ad agencies to come up with cleaning products targeted towards men because of the stereotypical image of women as being the stay at home mom that cooks and cleans for fun. This image will be hard to
break since it is rooted in almost 60 years of advertisements but hopefully in years to come we will see a new era of change.

**Limitations**

The only limitations facing this content analysis are that finding studies that have been shown from 20 years are hard to find. A lot of studies have been done in the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s during the women’s movement but not a lot of studies have been done today due to the high desire for sexual and gender specific ads. A lot of articles typically tend to say the same information as well so it can seem like a lot of them are repeating themselves.

**Future Research**

Future research that should be done on this topic is to find more up-to-date statistics and studies done on the portrayals of women in advertising. Look up more info on the statistics of women and men and their gender roles in advertisements pertaining to the past 10 or so years. Also, look at the current magazines and television ads to compare to old studies to see if there is any change in the way women are being portrayed. Gender roles have come a long way since the 50’s and there might be an even greater change with future advertisements to come, through right now it is fair to assert negligible progress over the last half century.
Appendix

A.  http://www.springerlink.com/content/x1785j2hgs347053/fulltext.pdf  
(Pages 184-185)  
B.  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLrUJY4D5Bc

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