

On feminism and advertising

(The interaction of two discourses)

Jasmine Ebede

Photographic Art

Tutor: Conway Lloyd Morgan

Word count: 8210

On feminism and advertising

(The interaction of two discourses)

Abstract	page 5
Introduction	page 6
What feminism is	page 7
What advertising is	page 10
Why advertising exists	page 10
Brand image	page 12
Advertising strategies	page 15
Femininity and alternative femininities	page 18
Product positioning and target markets	page 21
Women's magazines	page 23
Example advertisements	page 29
Conclusion	page 32
Bibliography	page 34
Plates	pages 38 – 41

Abstract

This paper is looking at how images used in advertising can be critiqued by feminist thought. First of all it is made clear what feminism and advertising are, and then the strategies employed by advertising are considered, along with the implications of them and how this could effect feminism's progress. It concludes that the images in question do not affect feminism's progress as much as it might have done in the past, because less extreme strategies are used today. Also, it highlights another topic that leads on from the conclusion of this paper (but isn't within its scope); that is the idea of "male" and "female" being social constructs, and that advertising has only exacerbated the inequality of women, rather than created it.

Introduction

This paper aims to look at how images used in advertisements can be critiqued by feminist discourse, and what effect such images might have had on feminism. It will consider how magazines can be used by advertisers, and to what extent, and will also consider how advertisers have responded to this feminist critique. The images referred to will only include those in print, and not include those in television advertisements.

It will firstly look at what feminism is – what its concerns are, what its main goals are and what the movement grew out of. Then it will move on to examine what advertising is – what its aims are, what strategies it employs in order to achieve them, and the implications of advertising. Afterwards, it will look at advertisements in terms of feminist thought – how feminism responds to the images used in advertisements, and will conclude if a resolution between advertising and feminism can be met, and what this might entail.

What feminism is

As stated in *Encyclopaedia of Feminism* (Tuttle 1986), feminism is a term which has no definite definition, as it means varying things to different people. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, “the word refers to everyone who is aware of and seeking to end women’s subordination in any way and for any reason” (Tuttle 1986). Bell Hooks, however, “objects to this ‘anything goes’ approach, saying it has made the term practically meaningless because ‘any woman... can label herself a feminist’” (Tuttle 1986). While this is true, there is nothing to say that any woman can not label herself a feminist. Hooks’s argument is that of a theorist, somebody who is looking at the issue from an academic point of view. It is not an argument from somebody who is interested in the everyday, practical instances of feminism, and feminism is not just a theory, but something that needs to be put into practice for it to achieve anything. That is to say that it is not enough to write books on the subject, and merely discuss it; it must actually be applied to the situations it aims to rectify. To narrow down the broad definition given by Tuttle, feminism is said to be concerned with such things as “the nature and mechanisms of male oppression, as well as the nature of female experience under these mechanisms” (Sim and van Loon 2004). This is important because this acknowledges the ways that males “oppress” females in society (which the definition offered by Tuttle does not do), and what it is like to be under this oppression. To go even further, Elaine Storkey (1985) writes:

Modern society ... is a society in which woman are dependent, manipulated, vulnerable, passive and exploited and men are dominant. Society is designed by men for men, and women are seen as functioning to uphold and support the male domination. Thus, woman’s work, ... echoes daily her total dependence upon, and subordination to, the man.

Whilst “oppression” may be thought of as something physical, or something overt, what Storkey means is that the oppression that women endure is something ingrained in society; it is not about one man oppressing one woman, but something that happens all the time within society as a

whole. There are also many forms that this oppression takes, such as women traditionally being the one who looks after the home, while the men are working, and the objectification of women whilst men are objectified less often.

Furthermore, feminism is concerned with females being lesser than males in society, and is about “challenging the division of labour in the world that puts men in charge of the public sphere while women slave away unpaid in the home” (Watkins 1992). Going back to Mary Wollstonecraft and the Age of Enlightenment makes this challenge more understandable, as she was somebody who worked very hard to get an education for herself in an age where only boys were sent to school. She accomplished a lot during her life, including founding a school to teach girls. This can be considered to be the start of what is now known as feminism, the start of the struggle for equal rights for women. As Saul (2003) writes, some people believe that feminism is no longer relevant:

Many people today think that feminism was a fine thing its time but that it has done its job ... Women can vote, hold jobs, and get educations. Women are entering traditionally male workplaces and professions in ever-increasing numbers.

It is true that these are reasons to believe that feminism is over because these are issues that have been fought in feminism’s earlier years. However, feminism is still relevant because there exists different issues that affect women; things still happen which suggest that women are still subordinate to men. Rather than trying to win the vote for women and the right to an education for girls, modern-day issues include the objectification of women, the “glass ceiling” in the workplace and equal pay for women who do the same jobs as men. These issues are just as important as the others that feminism worked towards – they are all about the subordination of women. For example, the “glass ceiling” is a metaphor used to describe the fact that many women in the workplace cannot seem to advance past a certain level of authority in their respective jobs – it is as though there is an invisible ceiling that automatically stops them from progressing beyond a

certain point in their career. That this is a common occurrence suggests that is a reason for this, a reason that is more than the incompetence or unsuitability of the women in question. According to Catherine McKinnon (Saul 2003), though it is not discrimination if the selection process for a job results in more males than females being hired (so long as gender is not a part of this selection process), it is discriminatory to deny somebody a job on the basis of their gender, unless gender is a specific requirement of the job in question. Therefore, it would not be considered gender discrimination that more men reach the top of the workplace hierarchies if it is the case that, for example, to reach the top one must have certain characteristics that tend to be found only in men. This is a reasonable analysis of what discrimination is. However, it is unlikely that so many women are without the characteristics needed to get to the top of their profession, and so it can be said that at least some discrimination is taking place.

What advertising is

The word "advertising" comes from "the medieval Latin verb *advertere*, 'to direct one's attention to'" (Danesi 2006). According to *Barron's Dictionary of Marketing Terms* (Toffler and Imber 1994), advertising is "persuasive and informational and is designed to influence the purchasing behavior [sic] and/or thought patterns of the audience". There are two types of advertising – commercial and non-commercial. An example of non-commercial advertising might be an advertisement for a charity. Commercial advertising, however, is the advertisement of a brand or, most importantly, an image (Vestergaard and Schrøder 1985). Vestergaard and Schrøder (1985) identified two types of commercial advertising – the first is that which targets the individual consumer, and the second targets other companies. Where a company advertises its products or services to other companies, it could be said that both parties are equal. That is, both parties know what advertising aims to do, and what strategies are used, and so might not be as easily persuaded by such strategies as the individual consumer might be. Where a company is advertising its products or services to the individual consumer, however, both parties are not equal, for the individual consumer may not be aware of the strategies used by the advertisers in order to sell their products. This makes it easier for advertisers to succeed with their advertising strategies.

Why advertising exists

Advertising exists to promote and, ultimately, (in most cases) sell a product or a service. In *Advertising Today*, Jefkins (1984) says that "unless people are told often enough in a sufficiently convincing and compelling manner ... they will not make the effort to look or enquire and perhaps order or buy". This makes sense – if people do not know that a product or service exists, then they will not buy it. If there was no advertising to make us aware that we can go and purchase, for instance, a particular brand of vodka, we would only know about it through chance. In turn, the company would not make as much money as it could, because it would not be making as many people as possible aware of its product. With the help of advertising, be it in print, on television or radio, or in new media such as the internet, companies are able to communicate to the world the

existence of their products.

Companies not only use advertisements to make potential consumers aware of their products, but also use it to distinguish themselves from other companies who sell similar products. If there is only one manufacturer of mid-priced hatchback cars, for example, then that company is the only company from whom a such a product can be bought; if, however, there is more than one manufacturer of mid-priced hatchback cars, then they are all competing for the consumers who will buy one. Similar products manufactured by different companies may differ – in the case of the car, one make may have a slightly more powerful engine than some others, or one make may have a bigger boot than some others. The differences between similar products made by competing companies is what we, as consumers, use to decide which product we should buy. If we decide that the most powerful engine possible is what is important to us, then we will choose to buy the appropriate model over others. It is important, therefore, for companies to advertise in such a way that will ensure their product or service is chosen above all the other similar ones. Advertising is a powerful tool both for the consumer and for the company – the consumer is able to make the best choice possible with all of the information given and the company gains more sales of that type of product than other companies.

Companies do not necessarily differentiate their product in a simple manner, listing good reasons to buy theirs over another, for example. Jenkins (1984) writes that "unless attention is attracted, unless the drum is beaten and the trumpet blown, the message will be ignored and ineffective" – unless an impact is made with the advertisement, the consumer may not decide to buy the product. A simple list of reasons to buy the product probably would not be as effective in selling it as pictures, slogans, colour and position would be.

Since advertising is such an essential tool to persuade the consumer to buy a product or service from a specific company, it makes sense that companies should rely so heavily on it. In doing so,

they use their advertisements to make suggestions to their audience. This is done by extension of making an impact with the advertisement, as Jefkins (1984) wrote. For example, an advertisement for casual clothing company K-Swiss shows a young man wearing the branded shoes and jacket, whilst leaning on a shiny black Porsche in what appears to be the grounds of a villa. There is a link between the car and the building and the person wearing the clothes. Because the car and the building are in the advertisement for casual clothing, there is the implication that, perhaps, people that wear that particular brand might be people that live a lifestyle considered "luxury", with regular holidays abroad and an nice car. In *The Language of Advertising*, Vestergaard and Schrøder (1985) mention a summary of the task of advertisers, as given by Lund – advertisements should "attract attention; arouse interest; stimulate desire; create conviction; get action". This advertisement could be considered a successful one because it advertises a product as superior to others by giving it a "luxury" status by association; if it were shown being worn by somebody running, wearing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, it would be seen as a practical item.

Brand image

Brand image is all the ideas about a brand that the consumer has, including the type of person its products are intended for, where they might be sold and ideas concerning what the company might be like (Wright et al. 1982). All of these factors influence the perception of the audience, and whether or not they buy the product in question. For example, somebody might believe that Nike products are aimed at young people, based on what advertising they have seen, and may consequently be decide not to buy their products. Brand image is an intrinsic part of advertising. As already explained, advertising is necessary for a company to increase sales of its product. The company needs to compete with other companies who offer a similar product, also, and this leads to advertising that is more complicated in terms of how it works. The problem with there being more than one manufacturer of any given item is that they are all, essentially, the same thing. This is why advertising exists, and is also the reason for more creative and complicated advertising – to help to sell more of one company's product than the next company's near-

identical product. In the case of something such as cigarettes, for example, it can be seen that all cigarettes are made of the same components. There is not much to distinguish one company's cigarettes from the next company's, as they all consist of tobacco leaves wrapped in cigarette paper, with a filter on the end. Therefore, in order for one manufacturer of cigarettes to sell more of their product than another, they must develop their brand image, and advertising "often contributes a great deal" to this (Wright et al. 1982). Indeed, in *The Hidden Persuaders*, first published in 1957, Packard (2007) summarises that brand image is important in advertising because of "the growing standardization of ingredients in most products". He gives the result of an experiment in which, out of hundreds of smokers who smoked only one of three major brands of cigarette, only thirty-five percent of them could tell which brand was their usual (after smoking all three). This is conclusive that, often, the image of a brand accounts for a lot more than the product itself, that there is no discernable difference between brands and, therefore, no logical reason to choose one brand over another. To further illuminate how important brand image is, Pierre Marineau succinctly says that, with advertising, "you want the customer to fall in love with your product and have a profound brand loyalty when actually content may be very similar to hundreds of competing brands" (Packard 2007).

There are many strategies used by advertisers to persuade audiences to buy their products. They all work to go against what is logical – the audience is to be persuaded to choose one brand over another, even to believe that there is a difference between one brand and the generic product. In the instance of soap – by definition, "a compound of natural oils or fats with sodium hydroxide or another strong alkali" (Soans and Stevenson 2005) – we know that there cannot be many deviations from the basic composition, yet we still choose to buy one brand over another. Therefore, it follows that advertising strategies, too, will be illogical. That is, advertisements do not objectively state the features of a product, but rather convey an image that the consumer will relate to.

Advertising strategies

The biggest and most important advertising strategy concerns building an image for the brand. In doing this, one thing advertisers can do is to use images that are directed at a particular type of person. In *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 2007), there is an explanation about how this may have begun:

The Jewel food stores chain of Chicago, in its search for appealing “personality” that would give it an edge over competitors, came up from its depth probing with one promising answer: it decided the chain should ... take on the traits “we like in our friends”.

He says that this was taken further, so that advertisers thought it would be a good thing if they could build into their products traits that we see in ourselves (Packard 2007). The object of this strategy is to build a brand image that the audience, the potential consumer of the product, can identify with. This is a strategy that involves stereotyping, a strategy that will be covered later in the paper.

Wright et al. (1982) write that "advertising is a vehicle for building bridges between the consumer's self-image or self-perception and product and brand images", and this is often used in a negative manner. Building brand image through identification with a certain type of consumer, convincing them that that is the brand for them (rather than a competitor) is a case of the consumer being made to see everything about a product except that it is most probably the same as any other brand. For example, an advertisement for a brand that wants to appeal to people with a particular lifestyle will highlight everything about it people with that lifestyle might want. This is not particularly harmful, except perhaps in persuading the consumer to spend more money than is necessary, where that brand might be more expensive than the generic product that is maybe just as good. However, there are other strategies used in advertisements that are, potentially, more harmful. Vestergaard and Schrøder (1985) refer to this as "advertising as a

psychological mirror" because "the frustrations of contemporary life surface as problems to be solved by the products or services offered by the advertisers". They say advertisements like this work by constructing an imaginary world featuring happy or glamorous people who are clearly successful in which the audience "is able to make come true those desires which remain unsatisfied in his or her everyday life". This does not seem as though it might be harmful in any way, but Berger (1972) describes in advertisements a "contradiction between what he [the audience] is and what he would like to be. Either he becomes fully conscious of the contradiction ... or else he lives continually subject to an envy". Advertisements that employ promises and threats, and suggestions of success from using a particular brand play a detrimental part in causing audiences to evaluate themselves against what they see in advertisements.

Advertising is not just for selling the product; it is also used to increase the sales of a product. Ultimately, a company exists to make money, and if it can make more then it will attempt to do so. In *Advertising*, Wright et al (1982) identify two types of advertising – primary-demand advertising, and selective-demand advertising. The former is the type of advertising used to stimulate demand for a kind of product, for example personal music players. This type is very effective when there is only one manufacturer of personal music players on the market, because if the consumer decides that he or she wants one, there is no choice regarding who to buy from. This kind of advertising can be effective whilst being simple. The latter is the type of advertising that stimulates demand for a particular brand of personal music player. This is the type of advertising that would be used to increase the profit of a company. It can work by creating a desire for the product, perhaps by advertising a feature of it that is aesthetically appealing or gimmicky. It does not really matter what the feature is, how inventive it is, or even how useful it is, but the audience has to be made to desire the product. Selective-demand advertising is what makes some advertisements potentially harmful. Besides creating desire for a product, it can also create need. Desire differs from need in that one might desire something non-essential – a car, a personal music player or a

pair of shoes – whereas to need something is to feel as though it is essential for something else to happen (such as being happy or successful). Creating the need for a product is done through implicit suggestions. An example of this could be found in an advertisement for home insurance. It may use image and copy that convey a feeling of dread should the house ever be ransacked by thieves, or flooded by a swollen river. Somebody who has never had insurance for their house and belongings may see the advertisement and suddenly feel the need for it, despite never doing so before. The advertisers have, in order to increase profits, created the need for the service by highlighting scenarios which may be unlikely to even occur as reasons to buy their services. If he or she then buys insurance on the basis of seeing that advertisement, then the advertisers have been successful in creating need for a product. There is a downfall to selective-demand advertising, and that is that the customer who buys insurance after seeing advertising may not purchase it from the company whose advertisement was seen. In this case, that company does not benefit from the advertising. However, if this kind of advertising persuaded enough viewers that they needed insurance for their belongings, then the whole market would have increased sales, and the company with the original advertisement in question would still benefit from this, if not as much.

When the basics of this kind of advertising are applied to beauty products or clothing rather than insurance, the potential harm is more obvious – advertisements are creating a need within people to be the most beautiful, best dressed person they can be, rather than creating the comparatively harmless need to insure one's belongings will perhaps cause people to strive towards being a certain person as conveyed by advertisements. This, as Berger (1972) suggested, could result in a situation whereby the person continually feels dissatisfied with themselves.

As mentioned earlier, building a brand image by incorporating into the brand traits we see in ourselves involves stereotyping. Within the visual media, there are several stereotypes of women. One of these is that women are sexual objects. In *Provocateur: Images of Women and Minorities*

in Advertising, Cortese (1999) writes that, in advertising, women's bodies are "often dismembered or hacked apart". An example of this would be an advertisement containing a woman, but showing only her legs. This has the implication that legs are the only important constituent of women, and that an intellect is unimportant. The effect of this dismemberment is that, literally, women cease to be seen as whole human beings, and simply as objects. Cortese also writes that features such as plump red lips and cleavage are frequently the main focus of advertisements. The repetition of such devices throughout the advertising industry suggests to audiences that women are only objects. Cortese notes that this act of "body-chopping" happens more to females than it does to males, and thus advertising images support the subordination of women.

Whilst Cortese has valid points in his argument, it may not be the case that all advertisements deliberately employ these methods of objectification with the intention of suggesting that women are nothing more than objects. For instance, an advertisement may show a close-up of a woman's mouth on which she has used red lipstick. Rather than to objectify women, the advertisers may simply want for the lips to be prominent, as they have a product to sell. However, as Carter and Steiner (2004) write, "critics of pornography and of advertising that features women's body parts, say that in treating women as commodities to be sold, these cultural forms contribute to the perpetuation of women's dehumanisation and subordination", and so any objectification – the sole intention of the advertiser or not – undermines the feminist goal of equal rights for women by "[removing] discrimination against women" (Lovenduski and Randall 1993).

Femininity and alternative femininities

Another prevalent stereotype of women to be found in visual representation is that they are all very feminine. Women's magazines exist to sell femininities (Ferguson 1983). Therefore, it is the case that the images within them perpetuate ideals of femininities; to not do so would be to sabotage themselves. Ferguson (1983) writes of women's magazines:

Women's magazines collectively comprise a social institution which fosters and maintains a cult of femininity. This cult is manifested both as a social group to which all those born female can belong, and as a set of practices and beliefs: rites and rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies, whose periodic performance reaffirms a common femininity and shared group membership.

Highlighting this fact makes it impossible to criticise the advertising images in women's magazines, because without advertisements for make-up, perfume and clothes they would be paradoxical. Nonetheless, they still play a part in undermining feminism's goals.

Some advertisements communicate choice (Saul 2003). They suggest to female audiences that there is an alternative to the widely propagated stereotypes of women as delicate, feminine beings, by showing women as active, independent, capable human beings. However, far from being an alternative, these images simply represent a shift in the peddled feminine norms that women internalise. The main problem with these magazines is not that they promote a specific feminine ideal; rather, it is the effect of believing that they must strive to be a certain person that they have on women. In *Feminism Is For Everybody*, Bell Hooks writes:

Before women's liberation all females young and old were socialised by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men.

She writes that "challenging sexist thinking about the female body" is one of the "most powerful interventions made by contemporary feminist movement". Thus, women's magazines so heavily promoting an ideal femininity undoes some of feminism's work to liberate women from the idea that appearance is paramount. This is not to say that to be a feminist is to not take care of one's appearance, but it depends who it is done for – for oneself or for the satisfaction of men. This relies on individuals having enough independence to make their own choices to accept or reject

what images promote.

Some feminists see femininity as the cause of women's oppression, because feminine behaviours are associated with passivity and dependence (Hollows 2000). This is problematic, as feminists do not want to be passive or dependent.

In *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, Judith Williamson (1978) writes that a sign "can only mean if it has someone to mean to". This is to say that, whilst advertisements may be criticised for the messages they disseminate, the messages can only be criticised because they mean something to those that view them. For instance, an advertisement that uses an image of a woman lying on top of a car could be criticised for showing the woman in a passive state. However, only people who have some understanding of the semiology employed by advertisements will understand any subtexts that are presented. They are the only people who will argue that the advertisement sets out to represent women as passive, whilst everybody else takes it at face value – as Williamson (1978) puts it, the viewer is a "creator of meaning". Feminists argue that feminine ideals oppress women, but this may not always be the case – if one is too aware of the media, too many meanings can be read into everything it presents us with. That is to say that if it is true that a sign can only mean something if it has somebody to mean to, then it is possible that those who have little understanding of the media are those who are freest from these norms, as they do not perceive them as "norms" as such. According to Williamson, "signs are given their value as currency *by us* in our 'recognition' of what they stand for" (1978). So while advertisements promote femininity, and some feminists believe that this femininity is the cause of women's oppression, it is fair to say that theorising women's liberation is also a cause because of the way it seeks negative aspects of everything – if one is to look hard enough, everything will seem to be an act of oppression and, instead, feminism as a movement ought to look at ways to overcome the issues it faces without putting too much emphasis on blaming other things. It is difficult to accept that every advertisement we are faced with actively

uses devices to promote the idea that women are lesser than men, and if we did not have the knowledge of what is being promoted we would not be affected by the advertisements. Conversely, Saul (2003) does suggest that any “conviction” a woman may have that she is unaffected by advertisement images may be the result of an internalisation of the norms that are promoted. For example, a woman may see an advert which promotes a particular ideal of femininity and say that she doesn’t pay any attention to what ideals the media promotes, that she dresses and behaves in the way she wants to. However, if she has already internalised such ideals, she will be unaware if the way she dresses and behaves is indeed influenced by the media. Additionally, it may be that she subscribes instead to a different femininity, and the idea of alternative femininities will be covered later in the paper. In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Cartwright and Sturken (2001) write that:

The capacity of images to affect us as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke ... Their meanings lie not within their image elements alone, but are acquired when they are “consumed”, viewed and interpreted.

This concurs that images can only mean something when we know what they are meant to mean, and the more we know what images are meant to mean, the more meaning they have.

Product positioning and target markets

Product positioning is important in advertising: “no topic received more attention in advertising circles during the 1970s than product positioning” (Wright et al. 1982). It refers to the area of the market that a product is targeting. For example, one particular brand of soap might be positioned as a beauty product for women, as opposed to a soap used by mechanics to clean oil from their hands. Bearing in mind that, compositionally, soaps are all very similar, the position of the soap as a beauty product relies on stereotyping – the advertisers must view women as obsessed with everything generally considered a feminine concern, including having soft hands. If a company

positions their bar of soap in the beauty product market they will employ advertising techniques relative to the product position; they will use images and copy to promote a stereotype of women, which in turn appeals to the correct audience – the women themselves.

Product positioning can get complicated, and data mining is an important factor. Advertisers are able to further narrow their target markets with the help of such data because, from the data, it is possible to know what kind of products people in particular age ranges buy. For example, rather than simply knowing that people aged twenty-four to thirty tend to buy a lot of fruits and vegetables, the data may indicate that the majority of it is organic, and that this demographic tends to also buy ecologically-friendly household products. By data mining, companies are able to identify very specific sections of the market – even more specific than young people who care about the environment and their health – and can make informed guesses regarding what product this market might buy. The data from data mines are helpful for placing products because the advertisers know what matters to, and what appeals to, that particular target market.

Women's magazines

Where femininities are concerned, the idea of targeting very specific markets works in the same way. Where to place advertisements is a part of product positioning – if they are to go in a magazine, the choice of magazine is important. Different women's magazines represent different femininities, and these differences are communicated with the use of signs. These signs have connotations. For example, in *Media Semiotics: An Introduction*, Bignell (2002) notes that magazines often employ the use of a “slogo” – a slogan that functions as a logo. An example of a slogo is the one used by *Cosmopolitan*: 'Smart girls carry *Cosmo*'. The immediate implication of this linguistic sign is that the most successful, beautiful and fashionable women read the magazine. It also uses the word “smart” to potentially be read in two ways – it implies that the women that read the magazine have intelligence for doing so, presenting that as a reason for others to buy it. The connotations of slogos, and even the title of the magazine itself, help to define the kind of femininity that the magazine perpetuates by constructing what Bignell (2002) calls a “mythic identity”. The advertisements contained within the pages of the magazines are an extension of this; the products advertised must reflect the femininity that the magazine promotes.

The magazines *Good Housekeeping*, *Vanity Fair* and *New Woman* are all very different in the femininity they promote. *Good Housekeeping* is for the “educated and intelligent modern woman” (Bell and Hollows 2006), *Vanity Fair* promotes a sophisticated feminine ideal, and *New Woman* is targeted at twenty-something women who are pre-occupied with fashion; the titles of these magazines allude to the type of femininity they promote, with *New Woman* appropriating the “New Woman” feminist reaction to gender roles. Beyond the title of the magazine, the cover image is very indicative of the audience the magazine targets – on the cover of the March 2008 edition of *Good Housekeeping* is Amanda Redman, who is “fearless and facing 50”, the implication of which is that this magazine should appeal to women who are in a slightly older age range than other magazines target, and that ageing is not to be considered a negative thing; on the cover of the March 2008 *Vanity Fair* is an image of women who are elegantly dressed.

Compared to the cover of the March 2008 edition of *New Woman* – featuring a fairly ordinary-looking young woman dressed in clothes that could be from a high street store – the *Vanity Fair* cover suggests sophistication, and perhaps an element of unattainability or exclusivity. That is important (but also potentially detrimental) because magazines aim to make us feel as though we belong to a particular group, and by suggesting exclusivity they imply that the femininity of the reader is different to that of readers of another magazine.

Magazines (and advertisements) often address “you”, inviting the reader to identify as a member of a group. This strategy is seen on the cover of the March 2008 *New Woman* (“why can't you stop eating?!”) This further forges the feminine ideal that the particular magazine is promoting because there is the assumption that if you are a typical reader of the magazine, there is the possibility that you may have such issues addressed to “you”. It is a case of building an image of the readership and, in turn, selling an image of the reader back to herself – in asking “why can't you stop eating?!” *New Woman* is asking the reader to address a problem she may or may not have, a problem the magazine itself created, and become a better person for doing so. *New Woman's* advocacy of this kind of femininity is particularly confusing because the magazine's title suggests that being a “New Woman” involves being obsessed with one's weight and fashion (“welcome to your spring wardrobe!”) and interested in minor celebrities (“Colleen exclusive”), which is very removed from the original ideal of a “New Woman”, who was supposed to be somebody who defied convention in order to improve things for women.

Inside the three magazines, the advertisements are, predictably, targeted in line with the magazine's readership. For instance, the very first products advertised in *Good Housekeeping*, *Vanity Fair* and *New Woman* are, respectively, Estée Lauder Advanced Night Repair, Stella McCartney clothing, and Next. Those three companies have chosen to place their products within certain very distinct markets – the older woman who perhaps worries about looking old, the woman who reads *Vanity Fair* and buys a lot of designer clothing, and the younger woman who

cares about being fashionable, but cannot afford designer clothing and instead shops on the high street.

The advertisements throughout the rest of the magazines continue to be of the same message. In *Good Housekeeping*, there are a lot of age-related products advertised, such as Pantene Pro V Time Renewal beauty products, L'Oréal Age Re-Perfect skin cream, L'Oréal Revitalift "anti-wrinkle and firming cream" and Clairol hair products ("100% grey coverage"); there are services and products featured that would not appeal nor necessarily apply to a younger audience, such as an advertisement for EDF Energy urging the reader to reduce their energy consumption, in return for which they will "reward you", an advertisement for Primigi children's footwear, and advertisements for family cars like the Nissan Note; and, in addition, there are practical products advertised, including treatment for irritable bowel syndrome, "stylish lingerie up to a JJ cup", and Sebo vacuum cleaners. Notably, the models in the majority of these advertisements (where one was used) appeared to be above the age of thirty-five. Looking at the products and services in *Good Housekeeping*, it is evident that the magazine targets the population of women who care about their health, about practicality, who do not wish to be seen as old because of implications of this (and so may choose to cover their grey hair). It suggests that when one gets older, one's interests move from frivolous things like shopping and makeup, onto more important issues like the environment.

New Woman is different. There are many advertisements for makeup; there is an advertisement for Beverly Hills Formula whitening toothpaste (superficial improvement, as opposed to advertisements in *Good Housekeeping* for Seven Seas cod liver oil and Nestlé Shredded Wheat); and there are advertisements for Diet Coke Plus, Snack A Jacks and Closerdiets.com. These all suggest that the *New Woman* readership is only concerned with being thin and looking good.

In *Vanity Fair*, the type of products and services advertised differ to the other two magazines.

Vanity Fair offers a different kind of femininity, assuming the readership is cultured (with The National Portrait Gallery advertising in the March 2008 edition) and has expensive tastes (there are many designers advertising on its pages).

The reason certain products are advertised in certain magazines is because the companies who want to advertise their products have done research into who their market is, and so they are able to advertise where they know it will be seen by the appropriate people.

All three of these magazines can be considered an alternative to an earlier role of women, oppressed by a patriarchal society; they all assume that women do not simply look after children (even have children) and cook and clean, but rather live their lives as they want to. It is a step in the right direction of overcoming oppression, however, they do not offer alternative feminine ideals. That is to say that all of the magazines seem to offer an alternative, but are narrow in their realisation of a possible alternative; the magazines and the advertisements are stereotypical, but it is just a different stereotype offered. Perhaps the problem is intrinsic – perhaps this problem stems from the idea of “male” and “female”, which are social constructs based on something as arbitrary as having blue eyes or having brown eyes. In this case, promotion of femininities is unavoidable, as it is unlikely that society will stop dividing humans into “male” and “female”, and if it is unavoidable, then stereotypes themselves are unavoidable, also. This is outside the scope of this paper, but is still relevant to the wider discussion (see Butler 1990).

The idea of advertisements communicating choice (Saul 2003), mentioned earlier, is an illusion. Advertisers want to elude stereotypes that the media literate consumer can easily recognise as potentially sexist, and so create the illusion of alternative femininities. That is to say that, whilst advertisers may avoid using images of typically feminine women (long hair, makeup and wearing a dress), they use images that appear to suggest something else. An example of this is Dove's *Campaign For Real Beauty*, which features so-called 'ordinary women'. The campaign aims to

address the issue that some people have with models generally used in advertisements – that they are thinner than the average woman, and therefore unrepresentative of the average woman. In turn, this has the implication that the product being advertised is aimed only at thin women, and that one must strive to be a similar size to the model if one wants to buy the product. The Dove campaign tries to convey the message that all women are equal, regardless of their size or shape (or colour); with this campaign, they have created an alternative to the typical feminine norm. However, it has been pointed out that, in the campaign, none of the women appear to have any skin blemishes, and Dove denies that any airbrushing has taken place (Hoggard 2005). Therefore, whilst the campaign is a move away from a typical feminine norm, it still suggests that the definition of femininity has broadened only slightly – all of the women featured in the campaign are no bigger than a size sixteen, and this implies that anything bigger than this is unacceptable. Conversely, it could be said that in choosing not to feature women above a size sixteen, Dove is giving the message that one's size is not a measure of one's femininity, but one does have to be healthy, regardless of shape or size. From this perspective, the Dove campaign is positive; it promotes health above all else. This strategy of communicating choice runs parallel with the idea of magazines creating alternative femininities.

Stereotyping and the building of a brand image are both strategies that undermine the intelligence of the general public. In the case of selling to women, when the two are used in conjunction, they do not just succeed in selling a brand image on a generic object, but also beliefs and self-worth.

Advertisements for domestic cleaning products often use the stereotype of the female as the person capable of carrying out cleaning tasks. If there is ever a male in the advertisement, he is normally portrayed as incapable of such tasks. This in itself does not have a particularly negative effect on feminism; if anything it shows women as perhaps slightly more competent than men. However, that the portrayal is a stereotype and not a rare occurrence does have a negative impact on feminism, because such advertisements imply that cleaning is a role only for women,

and that men do not know how to do it properly because they busy themselves with more important things.

So far, feminism and advertising have been looked at in terms of what they aim to achieve – feminism, in short, is the movement that aims to end inequality between men and women, and advertising is the promotion of a product or service in order to sell it. We have seen how, in order to sell more of a product than the competitors, a company must consider both the product's position and their brand image. Magazines act as a vehicle for the advertising, helping to clarify the position of the product as well as helping to forge the brand's image. In a way, magazines and advertisements have a symbiotic relationship – women's magazines exist to sell femininities (Ferguson 1983), and advertisers need to target the correct part of the market. This is done through advertising in the appropriate magazines and, in turn, the magazines appear to be subtly suggesting an affiliation between their version of the feminine ideal and the products on its pages. For instance, Harvey Nichols, Dubai International and Paul Smith are all advertised in the March 2008 edition of *Vanity Fair* because the companies believe that the type of people that read the magazine are people who are likely to appreciate designer wear and travel abroad to destinations such as the cosmopolitan city of Dubai, but it is also beneficial for the magazine to have these companies advertising with them because it helps to distinguish its readership – and its identity – from that of *New Woman*, for example, whose main concerns are probably socialising rather than travelling to Arab emirates.

The illusion of choice that both magazines and advertisers endorse by merely creating an alternative to an original feminine ideal has been considered. The discourse between feminism and advertising has become more complex over time: as audiences become more aware – and so critical – of the semiology of advertisements, advertisers have adapted their advertisements to be more subtle.

Example advertisements

Now the paper will address how the semiology has progressed over the past few decades, by deconstructing some typical examples of advertisements from periods leading up to the second

wave of feminism.

An advertisement for Drano (plate 1) – a drain cleaner – in a 1932 issue of *Good Housekeeping* was probably in that magazine rather than a different one because of its practical nature. The whole advertisement shows that it is intended for women – the tag line (“I could feel his eyes on me!”), the interaction between the dismayed man and the woman who appears to be worried and the copy, which explains the situation. The man's gaze is accusatory, and the copy (“...he'd look at me as much as to say 'your fault!'”) confirms this. The advertisement suggests that it is the job of the woman to sort out domesticities such as the drains, whilst the man goes out to work (in the image, he is tying his tie). The woman is also featured lower down than the man, a concept identified by Goffman in 1976 as *relative size* (Cortese 1999), indicating that he has greater authority than her.

A 1942 advertisement for Climalene Household Cleanser (plate 2) was featured in a magazine called *Woman's Day*. Its tag line is “war time means extra cleaning” and there is an illustration of a woman smiling broadly whilst cleaning. Her torso has been replaced with the packaging of the product being advertised, equating the woman with cleaning, suggesting that cleaning is her only purpose in life. The line “you have a war to fight right in your own home” is patronising – though probably well-meaning – because it implies that cleaning the house whilst the man is fighting in a war is equally important. This advertisement is not as bad as the previous one because of its attempt to explicitly say that both genders are equal as far as having an important job to do. However, the woman in the image is wearing high heels and a dress, which are not ideal for cleaning in (but are very feminine), implying that cleaning is very much a task for women.

An advertisement for Blu-White soap (plate 3) appeared in a 1954 issue of *Woman's Day*. Its tag line is “it's amazing! Your wash comes out shades brighter... even when dried indoors!” The use of exclamation marks – of which there are six more in the copy, and two more on the packaging –

suggests that soap is a woman's sole interest, and any developments in it are a reason for excitement; the picture of a woman smiling whilst holding up her “shades whiter” laundry confirms this.

A 1967 advertisement for Purex Super Laundry Bleach (plate 4) does not contain any models, and represents a shift in advertisers' strategies. Instead of associating cleaning products with women, this bleach is presented as a necessity for city life (“bleach that gets out city dirt and stains”).

Conclusion

It is not a coincidence that the second wave of feminism was happening in the same decade as this shift occurred; advertisers must respond to audiences' feedback, and if there is negative feedback surrounding the stereotyping used in advertisements, then they must change their advertising strategy or risk losing customers.

However, women's liberation perhaps did not progress advertising as much as it could have done, for it led to further stereotyping. Women's liberation became exploited to use women more often in advertising (Courtney and Whipple 1983). The argument is that women want liberation, and somehow portraying women as sex objects – that is, objectifying women – is liberation. So now advertising has regressed in terms of its portrayal of women, having gone from one stereotype, to another.

This is where the discourse between advertising and feminism becomes more complex, because advertisers have had to find a good middle ground between the two extreme stereotypes previously employed, and may try to avoid anything that is an obvious stereotype. In terms of feminism's successes regarding sexual stereotyping in advertisements, it is important to realise that the complexity of advertising means that it is not a simple case of stereotypes having been eradicated. Rather, advertisers aim to confuse their audiences by using more subtle stereotypes (but stereotypes, nonetheless) that will not be viewed as stereotypical. The use of subtle stereotypes is possible because of the many specific target markets that can be identified. The people within particular target markets all share common buying habits, beliefs, and so on, and can be stereotyped on this basis. Because there are a great number of such target markets – and so stereotypes – it is less easy to identify the stereotypes. What is stereotypical could be mistaken for individuality, and this mistake can be exploited to use stereotypes without them being noticed.

The use of stereotypes is, perhaps, almost unavoidable in advertisements. This is not necessarily a negative thing, but it is important that consumers educate themselves in media literacy so that they can be more aware of how advertising works. This would probably cause advertisers to create even more complex advertisements or perhaps even completely change, using a fact-based approach, with little or no opportunity to be read from a semiotic point of view. This would certainly be a positive thing for feminism, as there could be no possible feminist critique of such an approach.

However, this paper will conclude that stereotyping is a fundamental aspect of advertising and that, without it, companies would not know how to improve their product or service because they would not know who it was appealing to. Similarly, the consumer would not know if a product was ideal for them, because we can identify ourselves in stereotypes and a lack of stereotypes would mean no link between particular products and certain types of people.

Advertisements today are not a threat to the movement that is feminism because the extreme stereotypes are no longer used, though strategies such as “body-chopping” may still be an issue. The biggest threat to feminism is more likely to be the fact that society is divided into “male” and “female”; the promotion of femininities is only really a consequence of this. That is, advertising has simply exacerbated a problem caused by something that has existed forever. Therefore, having discussed the issue of feminism and advertising, and how advertising affects feminism, a continuation of the debate would regard how society can rethink gender as social constructs, which would remove the necessity to speak of “masculinities” as well as “femininities”, making stereotyping easier to avoid.

Bibliography

- ADCLASSIX. [WWW] <http://www.adclassix.com/index.html> (10 February 2008).
- ATKIN, D. 2004. *The culting of brands: when customers become true believers*. New York: Portfolio.
- BAEHR, H. and GRAY, A. (eds.). 1996. *Turning it on: a reader in women and media*. London: Arnold.
- BELL, D. and HOLLOWES, J. 2006. *Historicizing lifestyle: mediating taste, consumption and identity from the 1900s to 1970s*. London: Ashgate Publishing.
- BERGER, J. 1972. *Ways of seeing*. London: BBC.
- BIGNELL, J. 2002. *Media semiotics: an introduction*. 5th ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- BONNER, F. et al. 1992. *Imagining women: cultural representations and gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BROWNMILLER, S. 1984. *Femininity*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- BUTLER, J. 1990. *Gender trouble*. London: Routledge.
- CARTER, C. and STEINER, L. 2004. *Critical readings: media and gender*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- CARTWRIGHT, L. and STURKEN, M. 2001. *Practices of looking: an introduction to visual culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CHANDLER, D. 1996. *Analysis of advertisements*. [WWW] <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Modules/MAinTV/analad.html> (13 January 2008).
- CHOI, P.Y.L. 2000. *Femininity and the physically active woman*. London: Routledge.
- COBLEY, P. 1997. *Introducing semiotics*. Trumpington: Icon.
- CORTESE, A. 1999. *Provocateur: images of women and minorities in advertising*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- COURTNEY, A.E. and WHIPPLE, T.W. 1983. *Sex stereotyping in advertising*. Massachusetts: Lexington Books.

- DANESI, M. 2006. *Brands*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- DOVE. 2006. *Beyond stereotypes*. [WWW]
<http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.co.uk/DoveBeyondStereotypesWhitePaper.pdf> (09 February 2008).
- DUKE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES. [Online archive]
<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/> (10 February 2008).
- FERGUSON, M. 1983. *Forever feminine: women's magazines and the cult of femininity*. London: Heinemann.
- GALLERY OF GRAPHIC DESIGN. [Online archive] <http://graphic-design.tjs-labs.com/gallery-view?span=15> (10 February 2008).
- GREER, G. 1970. *The female eunuch*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.
- HOGGARD, L. 2005. Why we're all beautiful now. *The Observer*. [Digitised newspaper]
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/jan/09/advertising.comment> (9 February 2008).
- HOLLOWS, J. 2000. *Feminism, femininity and popular culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- HOOKS, B. 2000. *Feminism is for everybody: passionate politics*. London: Pluto Press.
- HYDE, M. 2005. Wrinkled or wonderful? *The Guardian*. [Digitised newspaper]
http://www.guardian.co.uk/women/story/0,,1385128,00.html#article_continue (9 February 2008).
- JEFKINS, F. 1984. *Advertising today*. Glasgow: International Textbook Company.
- LOVENDUSKI, J and RANDALL, V. 1993. *Contemporary feminist politics: women and power in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LUKAS, S. 2002. *The gender ads project*. [WWW] <http://www.genderads.com> (16 April 2007).
- MANGHANI, S. et al. 2006. *Images: a reader*. London: Sage.
- MARSHMENT, M. and GAMMON, L. 1988. *The female gaze*. London: The Women's Press.
- MCKEOWN, R. 1998. *A semiotic analysis of two ads for Persil liquid*. [WWW]
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/rum9501.html> (10 February 2008).

- OGILVY, D. 2007. *Ogilvy on advertising*. London: Prion.
- PACKARD, V. 1957. *The hidden persuaders*. New York: Pocket Books.
- PETRO, B. 2005. *How feminism transformed advertising*. [WWW]
http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/13241/how_feminism_transformed_advertising.html
 (27 March 2007).
- ROBINSON, J. 1998. *The manipulators: unmasking the hidden persuaders*. London: Pocket Books.
- SAUL, J. 2003. *Feminism: issues and arguments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SIM, S. and VAN LOON, B. 2004. *Introducing critical theory*. Royston: Icon Books.
- SOANS, C. and STEVENSON, A. (eds.). 2005. *Oxford Dictionary of English*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- STEVENSON, S. 2005. When tush comes to Dove. *Slate*. [Online magazine]
<http://slate.msn.com/id/2123659> (28 January 2008).
- STORKEY, E. 1985. *What's right with feminism*. London: SPCK.
- SWEENEY, K. 1999. Maiden USA: 'Representing teenage girls in the 90s'. *Afterimage*. **26**(2): pp14 – 16).
- THOMAN, E. 2006. *Rise of the image culture*. [WWW]
http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article79.html (29 April 2007).
- TOFFLER, B. and IMBER, J. 1994. *Dictionary of marketing terms*. New York: Barron's.
- TUTTLE, L. 1986. *Encyclopaedia of feminism*. Harlow: Longman.
- VESTERGAARD, T. and SCHRØDER, K. 1985. *The language of advertising*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- WALTERS, M. 2005. *Feminism: a very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WATKINS, S. 1992. *Introducing feminism*. Cambridge: Icon Books.
- WILCHINS, R. 2004. *Queer theory, gender theory: an instant primer*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- WILLIAMSON, J. 1978. *Decoding advertisements: ideology an meaning in advertising*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.

WILLIAMSON, J. 2003. 'The bleak reality of sexism, however 1970s, or cool, demands a critique'.

Eye. 12(48): pp10 – 13.

WRIGHT, J.S. et al. 1982. *Advertising*. 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

VAN ZONEN, L. 1994. *Feminist media studies*. London: Sage.



I could feel his eyes accusing me!

"He's a man who doesn't talk very much . . . but I could feel his eyes accusing me every time the bathroom drains slowed up. He'd look at me as much as to say, "Your fault!"

"And it was. For now I know that just a tablespoonful of Drano, sprinkled down all the drains every week, keeps them always open and fast flowing."

You can get Drano at almost any store, anywhere. The Drackett Chemical Company, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Drano
CLEANS AND OPENS DRAINS
... KEEPS THEM FREE-FLOWING

Plate 1

Drano 1932



**WARTIME
means
EXTRA
CLEANING**

You have a war to fight right in your own home, to lick the extra dirt of wartime.

Good weapons are important on the home front, too. When you want to get rid of grimy dirt quickly, Climalene is really good.

It dissolves grease... makes paint, tile and porcelain sparkle... saves hard rubbing and scrubbing.

Saves 3 Ways

1. TIME—Cuts greasy dirt fast.
2. WORK—No hard scrubbing.
3. SOAP—Cleans without soap.

**WASH AND CLEAN with
CLIMALENE**

**GET THIS BIG
CAN**

More for your money in the 26 oz. can of **BOWLENE** KEEPS TOILETS SPARKLING. Just sprinkle in.



THE CLIMALENE CO., CANTON, OHIO

Plate 2

Climalene

1942

**IT'S AMAZING! YOUR WASH
COMES OUT**

**Shades Whiter...
Shades Brighter**

**EVEN WHEN DRIED
INDOORS!**

**Sensational Blu-White Flakes
makes whites dazzling,
washable colors sparkling!**

No matter what you've heard or read about any soap or detergent, your wash will be *shades whiter, shades brighter* when you wash the Blu-White way. Yes, even when dried indoors!

Prove it! Pour in NEW, thin Blu-White Flakes — they dissolve instantly. Then add enough regular soap or detergent for rich suds. No matter what you've washed with before, you must have the whitest, brightest wash ever, or return the unused portion to Manhattan Soap Co., N. Y., and get *double your money back!*

FOR WASHBOWL WASHINGS, Blu-White is all you need. So kind to hands, and so economical!

GET BLU-WHITE TODAY!

THE ONLY WASHING SOAP GUARANTEED BY GOOD HOUSEKEEPING

**BLU
WHITE**

New Thin Flakes
Dissolve Instantly

BLU-WHITE

Blues while you wash

WHITENS! BRIGHTENS!

Special
Detergent
Flakes

Plate 3

Blu-White

1954



Plate 4

Purex 1967