

**A Look between the Lines:
The Appearance of Women in Advertising**

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With the invention of television comes advertising. Advertising uses a great many tools to sell their products and ideas. Over the years, advertising has had to change with political and economic changes and so they do not offend any of America's many diverse groups. This has not been so much a change of values, as it has been a change of not being blatant with sociological ideas. Women have long been viewed as the lesser sex. From the 1960s to present, women's rights have evolved, and advertisers had to present material in a new way as the years progressed. They could not show women as the lesser sex, but the connotations are still present. With the way advertisers show women in the present, viewers have to look harder to see that advertisers still show women as the lesser sex. The sociological evolution of women has changed, but advertising has not changed with it. The movement from overt sexism to more veiled sexism becomes clear in a comparison of commercials over the last fifty years.

A good example of overt sexism is the Gold Metal Flour ad called "Career Girl." This commercial shows an independent woman in the workplace. It starts with an apparently single woman walking to work while an announcer is talking about how a woman in today's workforce is strong and has to put up with everyday life. They show her taking the subway and having to learn what any man would know. The woman learns everything from the proper way to read a paper on the subway to enjoying the crude coffee of the workplace. They show her as a productive member of the workforce able to do the tasks asked of her. When her workday is over, the advertisement shows the woman going home and unlocking the door to her small apartment. The announcer states, "But this you do hold on to; every woman needs to be herself sometimes. Your answer is baking" (Gold Medal, 1962/2009, 00:21). It continues to show her putting on her

apron, and the announcer says that to be happy you must “bake often” (Gold Metal, 1962/2009, 00:24). The advertisement is sexist in the way it shows the women being a productive member of society, but not being happy until she can come home and cook. Even though she is single and has no one to cook for, she must cook to be considered to be a complete person. Fowels (1998) states that advertising has to show that people “[o]vercome obstacles and attain a high standard” (p. 8). This advertisement shows the woman overcoming work and attaining a higher standard by cooking. The sexist views are very prominent in this advertisement. In short, it states those women are accepted into the workforce and can be competent, but women still have to be the gender that cooks and cleans, and if women do not enjoy cooking and taking the time to do the woman’s duties at home, they can never be a well-rounded people.

In an advertisement created about thirty years later, “Oldsmobile Anti-Sexism Commercial (1995),” we see a commercial with a woman who is going undercover “to see if car salesmen treat women worse than men” (Oldsmobile, 1995/2010, 00:02). The commercial is set in an investigative reporting style. The woman who is a news reporter for an unnamed agency goes in as herself, Sally. She goes into a car dealership and talks to a car salesman and gets the price of a vehicle. The reporter is impressed that the car salesman did not ask her where her husband is. She later goes in dressed as a man, Sal. She was “shocked” to find that Sal got the same price on the vehicle as Sally. The advertisement ends with Sal going into the women’s restroom and the salesman also being shocked (Oldsmobile, 1995/2010). This advertisement shows that if women want equal rights, they have to go to an Oldsmobile dealer to accomplish this. This is more like reverse psychology than being a sexist commercial. It plays on the idea that society is still very sexist, but this car company is new and progressive. They will give everyone a fair price, even a

woman. Throughout the progression of TV, audience members start to see the ideas change. Although the idea of women still not being treated as equals is still evident.

The third advertisement, “SNOWPOCALYPSE | Dodge AWD | Commercial (2011),” starts off with a camera shot of a street. Cars are slowly driving by, and there are palm trees in the background, creating the scene and sensation of a warm climate. Strangely, everyone is wearing coats. The camera zooms in on a man talking on a cell phone wearing a heavy overcoat. The man in the overcoat slowly turns around and looks into the sky. Looking up, the man sees a light dusting of snowflakes falling to the earth. The camera zooms in on the man’s face where viewers see the calmness turn into an over-exaggerated panic. This is where all hell breaks loose; panic is in the streets. Once calm and docile, people are now running around like looters. Men are stealing jackets and supplies from the local hardware store, and old women are dumping canned goods into a shopping cart. As the snow begins to fall heavier, cars begin to spin out of control. They are being driven by men. Then men frantically get out of the cars and run away unable to handle the situation. It looks like a scene from an apocalypse movie. Then a car that stands alone drives by with no sense of urgency. As the camera focuses on the driver of this car, we see a woman in total control with not a care in the world, and looking on at the strange circumstances unfolding in front of the audience. This shows the audience that anyone can be a competent driver in bad weather, even women, if they own a Dodge AWD (Dodge, 2011). Although subtle, viewers can see how the advertisement company views women. Men are unable to handle any of the conditions that make themselves evident in the story line. The woman mentioned, drives the vehicle without a care in the world. This is much more subtle than the first advertisement, but still shows how advertisers think. The roads are not fit for driving, but even

women who are historically bad drivers can surpass men, if only they have a Dodge AWD. Owning a Dodge AWD will make women superior drivers to men.

These suggestive commercials show the way that society often sees women. Equal rights for women have progressed greatly from the 1960s; although restrained, the way advertisers show women still implies they think women are still the lesser sex, and careful viewers can see the subtle progression of that idea all over the media. Davis (1992) states,

Only when we learn to read these myths on a daily basis will we have the power to substitute other motivating ideas and goals of our choosing. Only then can we consciously transcend the Age of Image Communication and stop blindly accepting the myths of the image culture. (“So Why Does this Matter,” para. 5)

As a society, we have to be increasingly vigilant with the ideas brought into our homes. It is no longer the 1960s; viewers need to realize that the ideas of advertisers are not the ones society would like to call their own and recognize the messages written between the lines. These subtle forms of stereotyping go beyond gender and are often so indirect that we don't notice them consciously; however, with multiple streams of media creating images of what people should be like based on gender, race, ethnicity, and any other kind of difference, we are all susceptible to falling into those roles, but more dangerously, dealing with others based on the stereotypes we've subconsciously taken in.

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Notes from a Ninja:

- Since there is a large gap in when the ads were made and when they were put online, I used the two dates in the in-text citation for the Gold Medal Flour ad and the Oldsmobile one to show when the ads originally came out, but also gave the upload date for the *YouTube* versions. [See this link](#) for more info on that. Basically, cite the *YouTube* version, then if the ad is very old and that's part of your point, give the original date it was published at the end of the References citation. Use both dates in your in-text citation, starting with the original air date.
- It's interesting to compare that Dodge ad (which is no longer online, but only featured a woman as the cool-headed driver) to [this one](#) where there are both male and female Dodge drivers.