

Coffee for Pleasure:
A Sexist Folgers 1960s Coffee Commercial

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Advertisements have been working the wallets of American consumers since colonial times, however, targeting certain groups with different products has evolved into an art form in recent decades. In the 60s, American advertisers leaned toward using gender-role stereotypes to appeal to their target audience. A big brand name, Folgers, was one such company. In many of their commercials, they depict that for a housewife the best part of waking up was not having Folgers coffee in her cup, but it was having her husband finally stop berating her for making an awful cup of coffee. This ad clearly shows the sexism present during the time and is an example of how much our attitudes have changed over the years, but more importantly, it's an example of how advertising techniques have not changed during those same years.

In this Folgers commercial “New Instant Folgers” (1960) the advertisement opens with a family sitcom setting showing a male wearing a police officer uniform holding a cup of coffee and after taking the first sip he looks displeased and says, “Oh no.” The woman asks her husband “What’s wrong?” The man replies, “Oh it’s your coffee again, the desk Sergeant at the station makes better coffee than this.” The woman has a sudden sad but angry tone in her voice saying “Ed, really!” While she is turning around the husband grabs her hand and tells her “Sorry honey, but your coffee tastes terrible.” The camera angles cuts to her face with a disgruntled look then fades to a black screen then fades back in showing the woman at the grocery store walking towards an employee of the store, presumably the owner. She says, “Mr. McGregor, please help me.” The employee turns around from stocking items on the shelf and says, “Carol, what’s the matter?” To which the woman replies, “My coffee. Ed says he gets better coffee at the police station.” The employee opens a box and pulls out a container of new Instant Folgers and says,

“Why not try new Instant Folgers?” The woman looks confused and asked what the new Instant Folgers is and the employee responds saying, “New Instant Folgers, Carol, Tastes good as fresh perked, because it’s made from fresh-perked coffee and they actually turn that fresh-perked coffee into new Instant Folgers.” The woman agrees to try the new Instant Folgers and the scene cuts to black to her home. There she and her husband are sitting at a dining table holding cups of coffee and the man says, “Hey, the Sarge never made coffee like this.” The woman tells the man what the coffee was made from and the man replies, “I like it better.” The ad then ends with the man and woman leaning their heads together and a printed statement appears on the screen saying “Try new Instant Folgers. Tastes good as fresh-perked because it is!” (Folgers, 1960)

If the advertisement was seen today, it would be seen as inappropriate, but 50 years ago, the strategy to support such marketing was to guilt women across America into buying this particular coffee brand in the hopes of making their husbands happy. This is seen in multiple commercials from Folgers within the 1960 era. However, their techniques are not new. Davis, writing in 1992, mentions a media myth that a product can make a buyer happy:

Happiness, satisfaction and sex appeal, just to name a few, are imminent-and available with the next consumer purchase.

Alas, even when we are wealthy, there’s always something missing. We don’t have the right woman or man, our car stalls at an intersection, we spend too much time doing housework. But a whole group of images imply that we are on the verge of being happy.

("Happiness, Satisfaction and Sex Appeal," para. 1)

The Folgers coffee commercial described undoubtedly fall into this technique as the target audience is for the woman or housewife whose main priority was to make sure their husbands were happy. Additionally, the looks on the woman's face at the beginning of the ad show her

dissatisfaction and unhappiness, and the ending where both she and her husband are happy shows that as a result of her purchase. The missing thing that Davis refers to for this woman was Instant Folgers coffee. With one simple purchase, she has brought happiness into her life.

Another advertising technique at play here is the need to achieve, discussed by Fowles in 1998. The need to achieve is what “energizes people, causing them to strive in their lives and careers” (p. 8). The housewife portrayed in the advertisement wanted to achieve her husband’s gratification by getting him to enjoy her cup of coffee. Fowles (1998) continues to say, “According to Murray, the need for achievement is signaled by the desires ‘to accomplish something difficult. To overcome obstacles and attain a high standard. To excel one’s self. To rival and surpass others’” (p. 8). In the advertisement the woman was seen going to the grocery store to figure out why her husband didn't like her coffee and preferred the police station's coffee. This problem becomes an obstacle to overcome. In this way she is seen as successful.

Although the commercial for Folgers was made decades ago, it has strong gender-role stereotyping showing women needed to make sure their men were happy and had a complete disregard for female equality. They aimed this ad at women who were supposed to please their husbands and offered a simple solution that was achievable. Using these techniques continues to be a way to convince us to purchase products. By associating products with happiness and achievement, companies hope that we will unconsciously think they can solve problems in our lives. Many things have changed since the 60s, but advertising techniques like this really haven't.

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