

LANGUAGE AND GENDER: THE PORTRAYAL OF MASCULINITY IN
ADVERTISEMENTS TARGETED AT WOMEN

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Discourses on the gender differences between men and women have informed a variety of linguistic comparisons. John Gray, for instance, famously asserted, “Men are from Mars, women are from Venus”; likewise, Men have been termed as “dogs” and women as “cats” (Sheehan, *Gender and Advertising: How Gender Shapes Meaning*, p. 89). Still, the prevalence of gender stereotyping in social dynamics, and in effect—in communication, is a widely examined subject area. However, a majority of the literature in modern marketing, sociology, and language focuses on the indexing of gender-based attributes in advertising for purposes of targeting the corresponding market segment. This research, as a result, explores the gap in research that pertains to how masculinity is deployed in advertisements targeted at women.

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, language is a form of communication “made up of socially shared rules” that describe the: (1) meanings-; (2) creation-; and (3) combination of words; in addition to the (4) appropriate use of word combinations (ASHA, *What is Language? What is Speech?*, par. 3). On the other hand, advertising has been defined as “designed to spread information with a view to promoting the sales of marketable goods and services” (Harris & Seldon, *Advertising and the Public*, p. 40). Pointedly, language as a socio-cultural function has traditionally enabled researchers to analyse a given population’s display of their cultural dispositions.

In male-dominated societies, for instance, men discourses are perpetuated more publicly, while women’s contributions are considered as suitable for the domestic setting (Bucholtz, *Theories of Discourse as Theoris of Gender: Discourse Analysis in Language and Gender Studies*, p. 43). Yet, social constructs in contemporary society have put individuals under pressure to conform to the dominant opinion of how they should behave according to their gender (Cameron, *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, p. 62). Thus, as popular culture demands that men exude a confident and aggressive persona, it also idolizes the woman who flaunts a svelte figure and is in touch with fashionable trends (Eckert & McConnell-Gine, *Language and Gender*, p. 27).

Similarly, in marketing, the advertisers create ‘desire’ for their products or services in their targeted segments when they suggest that by choosing their offerings, the consumer would achieve an agreeable or ‘cool’ image (Green, *Advertising*, p. 72). The emerging trend in which advertisers market their products to women by suggesting the associated masculinity, however, is an indicator of how discourses on gender are swappable to communicate the benefits of exploiting stereotyped attributes of a gender for purposes of serving the other. Examples apparent in consumer products include cleaning products such as Mr. Clean Liquid Muscle, which denote masculinity as what women need in their cleaning chores to “[penetrate] dirt and lift it away” (Procter & Gamble, *Mr. Clean Liquid Muscle*, par. 1).

While the exploitation of gender stereotypes in advertising is a widespread phenomenon, the practice has mainly focused on targeting a particular gender through their gender-specific messages. Hence, whisky brands that intend to attract the loyalty of men, for instance, usually include insinuations of men achieving ‘real manhood’ (Wallman, *Stuffocation and its Impact on Brands*, p. 125). Effectively, the use of language in contemporary advertising aims to “send out covert messages about societies norms ... [such as] sexual attitudes; what is permitted and what isn’t” (Wallman, *Stuffocation and its Impact on Brands*, p. 125). Given such established

communication tactics, therefore, it is worth examining why gender dependent messages propagate in cases where women 'desire' the input of attributes traditionally associated with masculinity.

The paper explored its aims through a set of queries, namely:

- (1) How is gender objectification used in the real world? In essence, what is the reason for gender being used in adverts?

By referring to the Market Segmentation theory, the research aims to determine whether advertisers cater for what the consumers want, or whether it is based on stereotypical gender diversions.

- (2) How is language used in advertising?

Effectively, based on advertisers need to make a quick and lasting impression on the consumer and thus inform or persuade as pertains to the desirable features of their products or services, does the use of language have to be gender-specific?

Similar to prevailing social constructs, advertising exploits conformities to persuade consumers to choose a product or service over a competing one. Nonetheless, the practice achieves variable results depending on the effective and appropriate use of language to communicate to the targeted segment. Thus, either advertising could achieve acceptance or resistance as pertains to the message it purveys (Kellner, Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture, p. 11). Still, the discourse of advertising in relation to its exploitation of language has a social and cultural relevance, which ultimately, exposes the aims of the practice (Edwards, Cultures of Masculinity, p. 15). Then again, the use of language in advertising has conventionally included covert references to the ideal attributes of gender roles, which essentially, has imbued the practice with sexist undertones aimed at manipulating male and female perceptions of their fitting within suggested social constructs.

Borrowing from its definition, the description of advertising as a means through which marketers "spread information" (Harris & Seldon, Advertising and the Public, p. 40); it has been argued that the practice aims to establish and sustain product loyalty by persuading the consumer of the benefit of choosing the advertised commodity over the competing ones (White, Advertising, p. 72). Then again, the importance of effective communication is central to the contention with the need for advertising to present information in a manner that can achieve emphasis and persuasion (Sheehan, Gender and Advertising: How Gender Shapes Meaning, p. 24). In essence, therefore, the literature reiterated the need for advertisers to possess a good command of communication techniques in order to create the requisite interest and eventual preference for their products.

Nonetheless, advertising employs four major approaches according to the type of interest it aims to generate in the consumer, namely:

- (1) Product-information approach, in which the advertising predominantly communicates the utility of the product or service;
- (2) Product-image approach, in which the advertising employs symbolism and metaphors to covertly suggest the benefits of using the product in question;

- (3) Personalized approach, in which the advertising creates relevance for the product through reference to its enhancement of social needs, such as the strengthening of relationships; and
- (4) Lifestyle approach, in which the advertising manipulates the consumer's perception of her social meanings by highlighting the potential of the product to facilitate her achievement of the ideal lifestyle (Leiss, *Social Communication in Advertising*, p. 28)

At its core, advertising aims to exploit the perceptions and opinions of consumers by communicating the potential of the associated product or service in fulfilling the pertinent needs of the user. Moreover, advertising assumes a knowledgeable demeanour when describing the ability of the associated product's ability to satisfy needs that range from the rudimentary, such as clothing and food, to the narcissistic, such as the latest smart phone. Still, advertising approaches eventually imbue the products with the function of propagating the requisite social meanings. In other terms, when an advertisement communicates the 'manliness' attributable to a cleaning product, such as Mr. Clean, it generates the feeling of dependency in the woman using it for her domestic chores, in line with the myth that men are adept at carrying out the menial tasks around the house.

On the other hand, advertising employs the input of psychology and sociology to assess the prevailing attitudes, desires and expectations of a given market segment. Subsequently, it generates the appropriate messages around its associated products in order to position them as the ideal solution providers (White, *Advertising*, p. 32). In converse scenarios, however, advertising creates a need where none exists (Leech, *Social Communication in Advertising*, p. 32). For instance, by communicating the associated product's ability to improve on family relationships, sexual relationships, and community cohesiveness, advertising could aim to create a desire for the ideal lifestyle, and ultimately, establish a market for its products.

Advertisements are meant for consumption by a particular market segment. For that reason, advertising makes use of the elements of communication in order to create the likelihood of the consumer to internalise, understand, and act upon the transmitted message. Illustratively, the advertiser relies on a transmission medium to transmit a particular message, with the intent to create a relevant meaning for the targeted consumer.

Conceptually, the transmission medium encompasses the attributes of the communication channel, such as the employed language or imagery. On the other hand, the advertiser's message possesses social-relevant meanings, such as the contextual indicators like socio-cultural suggestions. Effectively, the implied 'meanings' are more likely to include references to gender stereotypes as they communicate the prevalent conformities, which the consumer would identify and relate to easily.

Hence, it is argued that in advertising, in addition to the advertiser and consumer as constituents of the advertisement's communication, the context plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of the message's transmission (Sheehan, *Gender and Advertising: How Gender Shapes Meaning*, p. 47). In essence, the context propagates the socio-economic, cultural, and more importantly, linguistic assumptions, which is bound to endear to the consumer's appreciation of the advertised product's suitability.

Language is a socio-cultural function that portrays the collective biases, desires and stereotypes of a society (Vestergaard & Schroder, *The Language of Advertising*, p. 81). Likewise, as a purveyor of targeted communication, advertising is in effect a practice through which socio-cultural aspects are manipulated. Hence, rarely do consumer products fulfil a rational function as compared to the meanings they communicate with the aid of certain cultural lenses.

Advertisement's use of language to suggest their products' ability to facilitate the consumer to achieve the desired social status or conformity is a well-established approach in literature.

Moreover, advertisements have managed to adapt their products into vehicles for the message of personal satisfaction, which in a majority of the cases is not commensurate with the corresponding objective utility that the consumer realises.

Based on the aforementioned communication aims of advertising, it is contended that the choice of language for an advertisement could borrow from a "prescribed path of advertising clichés ... [or] deviate from it and from rules of the language itself" (Leech, *English in Advertising*, 1972, p. 4). It is also maintained that advertising has traditionally employed a liberal attitude to language, evidenced by the practice's ability to choose from a given language's vocabulary and rules, without attending to the subsequent 'correctness' of the message in favour of establishing its suitability for socio-cultural contexts (Feasey, *Spray More Get More: Masculinity, Television Advertising and the Lynx Effect*, p. 359).

On the other hand, advertisements are renowned for their use of imagery to communicate their message. In nearly all of the cases, however, language compliments or elucidates the meanings of the associated imagery. The approach appreciates that language, when worded appropriately, has the potential for conciseness, which may be more difficult to replicate through imagery.

Ultimately, advertisements' use of language is aimed at targeting a particular market segment. Cognisant of the fact that market segments are categorised based on their social, gender, cultural, or economic attributes; advertisements, as a result, frame their messages accordingly (O'Barr, *Representations of Masculinity and Femininity in Advertisements*, par. 24). In instances where the targeted segment exhibits an inclination to gender stereotyping, for example, advertisements' choice of wording would exploit the phenomenon to create an understanding with the consumer.

The fluidity of language across the genders and across social-based boundaries makes it difficult to cast a given form of language as either masculine or feminine. Then again, because women and men are inherently different in their physiological and behavioural attributes, there exists a perceivable difference in how the sexes interpret messages. This supposition, in turn, informed literature on the differences between the sexes, with the most popular text, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, casting the sexes as originating from widely divergent nexuses. Still, the weakness in this assumption is highly evident because even within the genders, there is a difference in how members interpret messages. For instance, some women have an affinity for a particular form of language compared to other women, as is also the case for men. However, it is undeniable that the genders exhibit differences both physically and how they internalize and act upon messages.

When advertisers target a particular gender, for instance when marketing cleaning products to the female housekeeper market segment, they acknowledge the differences in how women perceive and act upon messages. This is informed by the fact that, "women, in their view, are more silent, interrupt less frequently than men, use tag questions and modal verbs more than men, use

cooperative strategies in conversations rather than competitive ones, and so on” (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, p. 45). Women are also known to deploy logical interpretations of messages less frequently when compared to men, as well as identifying with communication that is not as assertive as that of men. When advertisers aim to communicate with women, therefore, they assume a more conversational tone, instead of simply the benefits of the marketed product or service. In contrast to how advertisements targeted at men exude a dominant obsession with aspects of status and social power plays, women-targeted advertisements endear to the accommodative nature of women.

Still, advertisers display a tendency to communicate to women as if they are a sub-segment in the larger marketplace dominated by the vanities of men’s social meanings. In other terms, advertisers are prone to communicate to women in a manner that suggests by choosing their products; they would enjoy more acceptances in a male-dominated world. On the other hand, because feminine communication techniques demand the participants take extra time to create an environment of agreement and empathy; women are branded as susceptible to wordiness. For that reason, “there are widely held stereotypes about how talkative women are” (Weatherall, *Gender, Language and Discourse*, p. 56). In addition to the talkative nature of women, observers have also termed the bloated content of the feminine discourse as trivial. Interestingly, the disposition means that advertisers are faced with a more intricate process of determining the appropriate wording for women-targeted advertisements. Thus, while the same advertiser would blatantly highlight the benefits a male consumer stands to gain on patronising the product or service on offer—she would need to divulge convincing details to the female consumer. The advertiser, ultimately, needs to consider that “women’s speech style is oriented to values of connection and affiliation while men’s style reflects their concern with status” (Weatherall, *Gender, Language and Discourse*, 2002, p. 55).

The feminine language discourse, from a different perspective, is easier to interrupt and interject compared to that of men. Actually, men are renowned for their inclination to ‘cut in’ conversations in which a woman may be the main narrator. On the contrary, women are more likely to accept the interruptions that occur even if they are significant interlocutors. In addition, when women’s discourse turns out to be a source of contention, the involved female narrator is likely to offer an apology in order to mitigate discontent, and as a result, maintain the civility of the conversation. Still, when women participate in a conversation, their tendency to accommodate the varying lines of discourse is attributable to their cooperative nature, which allows as many interlocutors as possible to take part in the dialogue. Pointedly, the women taking part in the conversation are also likely to support the less visible contributors to gain an equal footing as is commensurate with the feminine disposition for cooperation.

Ultimately, on one hand, language has the potential to perpetuate the collective opinions and ideas of a society. Besides, language can also influence how consumers perceive certain aspects that are prevalent in the popular culture. For that reason, advertisers’ greatest asset is their ability to exploit a particular for purposes of creating a demand for a product or service regardless of whether the targeted segment has a rational need for the advertisers’ offerings. The fact that advertisers can identify the socio-cultural relevance of language means that their contribution to the overall discourse is, in essence, a pointer to the dominant concerns of a given society. Thus, when the Procter & Gamble marketing function notes that the female market segment desires

cleaning products that communicate a strong and resilient character, the inclusion of masculine suggestions is more likely to endear the company's products to the female housekeeper.

Then again, while language, when effectively designed and utilised for purposes of communication has the ability to transmit messages in the precise manner that the addressor intends—language in itself is a partial propagator. As a result, while not a “transparent carrier of meanings”, language is effectively, “a medium which imposes its own constraints on the meaning which is constructed” (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, p. 11). Conceptually, language acts a transmitter of the prevailing social phenomena, and in turn, assumes a contributory role as a social process in itself. Yet, the powerful nature of language can serve as a tool for control or influence when used effectively by a keen actor, such as an advertiser. Additionally, the influential attribute of language has traditionally enabled institutions and organisations to introduce, popularise, and entrench their agenda in the targeted population segment.

People have the interpretive faculties to determine how they perceive the world around them. However, such capabilities are highly malleable. Thus, through language, advertisers have the advantage of having access to the means to influence how individuals think of their life conditions. Simply put, when the marketing functions consistently suggest that a slim figure for women, for instance, is an admirable outcome—they are likely to inform a revolution in the way women envisage feminine beauty regardless of the associated health implications. As a result, language serves to shape “the way its speakers see the world” (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, p. 84). When the advertiser, therefore, continually insists that a cleaning product should exude ‘masculine’ attributes for it to earn the status of an effective product, it is bound to affect “the material conditions of women’s lives” (Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, p. 85) in a hypothetical manner.

Overall, advertisers have managed to create opinions and ideas of what it means to have the ideal life. In the least, advertisers aim to suggest that a particular product would act as the portal, through which the consumer achieves the facilitation to transit into a desired lifestyle. On the other hand, since advertisements have exploited prevailing social constructs to communicate why their products or services are a good fit—consumers have, in turn, labelled certain products as either “masculine” or “feminine”. Accordingly, the perpetuation of social construction in adverts is significant to the gender-based language discourse because, “advertisements depict for us not necessarily how we actually behave as men and women but how we think men and women behave” (Gornick, *Gender Advertisements*, p. vii). In cases where women patronise products that predominantly depict their effectiveness through inclusion of masculine portrayals, the “depiction serves the social purpose of convincing us that this is how men and women are, or want to be, or should be, not only in relation to themselves but in relation to each other” (Gornick, *Gender Advertisements*, p. vii).

As well as the gender-based discourses exhibit a fluidity, constantly evolving as ideas of society on gender and the associated roles adapt to social evolutions—gender, in itself also displays a continual adaptation. Aptly so, because gender; in contrast to sexism; mainly serves to categorise the sexes through socially pertinent descriptions and definitions. Then again, women have an affinity for the reliability and effectiveness of masculine input in ‘labor intensive’ tasks. This is because, “the masculine gender role model emphasizes power, whether in the boardroom, bedroom or on the playing field” (Rohlinger, *Eroticizing Men*, p. 61). As a result, the masculinity indices evident in a selection of products targeted at women indicates that the male gender is

characterised in a manner suitable for the feminine opinion of how that particular product should serve, relative to female-associated settings.

Accordingly, contemporary advertisements targeted at women depict masculinity in nine major categories; namely:

- (1) The man as a hero: for instance, an advert for a nursing course in the University of New Jersey portrays men as capable of making a difference in a female-dominated career, thus depicting them as ‘heroes’ whom women should emulate.
- (2) Man as an outdoorsman: based on the myth that men are in their element when outdoor; fashion ads, for example, convince women to buy their products as men who have a good understanding of the outdoors endorse them.
- (3) Man as a family man and nurturer: such ads convince women to choose their products because even the men portrayed therein are able to take on nurturing roles, such as caring for a baby.
- (4) Breadwinner: where the man is portrayed as dependable entity for the family
- (5) Hard worker: where the man is depicted as ready to take on any type of work, including blue-collar to earn a living, for instance, the Levi jeans ad declaring ‘everybody’s work is equally important’.
- (6) Consumer: where the man is depicted as satisfied with the product or service the advertiser offers
- (7) Urban man: where the man is living a fulfilled life in the ‘big city’ life with all its trappings
- (8) Quiescent: where the man enjoys the peace or even solitude that the advertised product offers
- (9) Erotic: where the product brings out the hypersexual side of a man, and as a result, suggests a fulfilling sexual relationship for the woman based on the renewed masculine confidence in the man. For instance, Unilever’s ad for the AXE shower gel shows that when the man becomes clean, he would be more willing to transfer attention to the woman

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Contemporary trends challenge the society’s opinion of what masculinity should achieve for both the man and the woman. Since individuality is the significant constituting factor for society, masculinity assumes the role of a factor through which advertisers can endear their products across the gender divide. The demands placed on advertising as pertains to creative and effective use of language; and need for enhanced creativity—the use of masculinity to target women is a natural choice. Thus, the masculine indices become a tool through which advertisers can attract the attention of the modern woman, who has both a liberal opinion of herself and men.

When Mr. Clean advertisements include portrayals of a masculine figure, therefore, they acknowledge the obvious discourse of depictions of the male body as the foremost indicator of attributes associated with the male gender. Then again, by including terms, such as “liquid muscle” (Procter & Gamble, Mr. Clean Liquid Muscle, par. 1) the Mr. Clean advertisers entrench the imagery of masculinity in the actual function of the product. Effectively, the Mr. Clean approach works to conjure up the housekeeper’s need for a product that employs the power and ‘blue-collar’ steadfastness associated with hyper-masculinity.

Yet, traditional discourses on masculinity suggested that it was, in essence, an absence of femininity in the man. However, contemporary approaches have managed to show that masculinity and femininity are amalgamable into a disposition where neither gender feels that they are too constricted in the hard-set social constrictions. Thus, the modern man is ideally a metro sexual, while the ‘masculine’ woman earns monikers such a ‘tomboy’ or a ‘handsome’ woman. Sexual liberties have on the other hand enabled the genders to derive pleasures from advertisements that were traditionally targeted at an audience of the same gender as the model in the advertisement. In other words, while male-centric advertisements would be aimed to communicate to the male consumer, contemporary approaches have overturned the practice, to the extent that sexy male models now target a mainly female audience and vice versa. The development is however, the more significant for masculine discourses because men were, by tradition, more given to ‘ogling’ over female models as compared to women. As a result, the emerging trends have enabled the modern woman to enjoy explorations of masculinity as it fits within her feminine needs.

On the other hand, the prevailing consumer culture has masculinised previously feminine-only products. Men now have the choice between skin moisturisers, hair shampoos, and deodorants from a selection of brands traditionally known to serve only women. However, the advertisers still have the task of displaying the masculinisation of those products so as not to risk over assuming the inherent distinctions between the genders. Thus, while women get to use products that contain strong references to masculinity, such as *Mr. Clean*, men have to contend with masculinised brand names typified by the names of body deodorants like Old Spice, Axe, Brut, Swiss Army, and Chrome. The approach is also evident in the products’ packaging where those targeted at men have dark or bold coloured packaging, and those targeted at women—even when they contain strong masculine references like Mr. Clean—have light coloured packaging. The packaging in these cases, relay the conventional discourse on gender stereotyping because even on attempt to masculinise the feminine products, hints of femininity continue to dominate.

Still, depictions of masculinity in advertising targeted at women mainly contain references to the sensibilities associated with femininity. Thus, while in male-centric advertisements, male models exude an excessive sexuality and an affinity for adventure or extraordinary capability—female-centric advertisements contain masculine references that suggest the caring, hard working, and innovativeness of men. For instance, whisky adverts continue to suggest that real men are fearless and confident, while advertisements for cleaning products portray the male model as willing to assist and ‘take charge’ of situations that would be challenging for the female user.

Ultimately, the gender discourses in advertising continue to exhibit a distinction between the genders. Furthermore, the bulk of the communication transmitted in the advertisements exploit social constructs such as gender stereotyping. The approaches serve to achieve and sustain market segmentation for the marketing function. Since gender is one of the obvious stratification

attributes, in addition to social class, race and religion, to name but a few—language discourses apparent in gender-specific advertising are meant to show how one gender could satisfy the needs of the other. The Mr. Clean approach, for instance, provided an apt case study of how masculinisation has served to instil confidence in women as pertains to how the cleaning product possesses capabilities typified by the hardworking, steadfast and committed male.

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