



Twentieth century female ad images: Cultural interconnections, social learning, and the dialectical logic of advertising[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The study conducts a historical investigation of the linkages among the focused social learning of a few (such as ideas of feminists groups), the amplification of those ideas throughout the masses, and observable female images in ads. The Hegelian sublation or *Aufgehoben* dialectical framework is applied to deepen understanding of how ad strategies have reconciled multiple cultural conversations about the proper image and role of women through the years. The findings of the research reveal distinctive dialectical processes and strategies in the ever-evolving patterns of female images in ads. The results of the study indicate that the focused social learning of the few is amplified to the masses through more emergent ad female roles and images during prosperous and peaceful times and is thwarted during times of national distress.

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1. Introduction

The female image is a rich symbol, replete with culturally crafted meanings, and capable of capturing a constellation of meanings housed within the female persona, ranging from the comfort, safety, and tradition of motherhood or perhaps the girl-next door to the CEO or the sexually provocative (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Their multiplicity of meanings has made female images amenable to promoting products in ads, and advertisers have long recognized that females in ads have the potential to attract consumers (MacCurdy, 1994; Tan, Ling, & Theng, 2002; Whipple & Courtney, 1985). The exact nature of the female persona has historically been at the center of divergent viewpoints about her proper role and appearance. In some historical eras in the U.S., there was wide social consensus that women should be portrayed in a modestly attired, strictly domestic and minor decision role at work or home, while, in other eras, diverse groups of people have imagined and sought a reconfiguration of a female role and/or image that was more liberated (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Koedt, Levine, & Rapone, 1973).

Undeniably, a rich scholarly tradition has contributed much to our understanding of the changing images of females in ads (e.g., Brace-Govan, 2010; Goldman, 1992). Yet, there is much to be learned about how the focused social learning that challenges traditional viewpoints is shaped by co-occurring historical events and is eventually given voice in mass-mediated ad images (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Scott, 1994). Such an investigation contributes to understanding how mass-mediated efforts may not only reflect cultural ideas but provide a public forum where mainstream society can confront emergent socio-cultural viewpoints that challenge conventional ideas. Likewise, the sensitivity of advertising images to national moods is an under-investigated area. The research goal is accomplished through the application of the Hegelian sublation or *Aufgehoben* dialectical framework which provides a platform for investigating how ad strategies have reconciled multiple and often opposing viewpoints (Young, 1972). The study relies upon historical records and 1407 magazine print ads depicting females across the 20th century in the U.S. Three research questions are framed and guide the selection and application of historical analysis aided by content analysis (Smith & Lux, 1993). Archival choices are designed to link data to the study's interpretive end of deepening current understanding of how emerging viewpoints were negotiated in the depictions of female images in advertisements.

2. Background literature

Throughout the 20th century, the role and image of females have often been the focal point of cultural conversations concerning social change and transformation. Interestingly, Moore (2011) applies the

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term 'ethical imagination' to address the way in which the individual, imagined relationships with others, and social transformation intertwine to produce novel and observable outcomes. The confluence of the individual and imagined relationships with others provides the germinating field for social change and transformation (Moore, 2011). The hopes and aspirations for new interconnections initiate a process of problematization. That process generates responses and proposed solutions that may bring about desired change and Moore (2011) suggests that the ethical imagination is at the core of cultural invention and change. The problematizations crafted through the workings of individual imaginations and interconnected groups are situated within co-occurring social, economic, and political processes. The problematization processes of "a variety of worlds" according to Moore (2011) can be made widely known and "instantly mediated" through the avenues afforded by mass media, such as social networking sites and news media.

The manner in which ideas generated in "a variety of worlds" spread throughout a population and to mass-mediated depictions is fascinating (Moore, 2011, p. 67). Such cultural diffusion is explainable through social learning (Bentley, Earls, & O'Brien, 2011). Bentley et al. (2011) suggest that cultural diffusion requires three elements: (1) source(s) of variation; (2) the means to transmit variations; and (3) a sorting process that selects variants that succeed and variants that fail. Sources of variation include the human mind, its imaginings, and adaptations to the socio-cultural world. Moore's (2011) conceptualization of the ethical imaginations' desires, hopes, and aspirations for reconfigured interconnections provides the rich ground for the sources of varied views about females through the century.

The transmission of variant views occurs through social learning (Bentley et al., 2011). Focused social learning by a few individuals with a variant view may amplify throughout the larger population by widespread copying or imitation of the behaviors and ideas of the variant view. The viewpoints of early feminists echoed the hopes and aspirations for reconfigured female roles, but the social learning of these ideas was focused within this smaller group and was not yet widely copied. From the perspective of social learning, individuals are hard-wired to imitate or copy and to conform to others, particularly if what is copied is deemed to be better. In the case of early feminists, the solutions proposed were not yet deemed by the masses to be superior to the established views about women. Hence, the central premise of social learning is based on copying others and particularly when ideas to be copied are perceived as better, popular, or successful. Copying behaviors help explain how ideas, phrases, and behaviors amplify and spread through a society. A logical extreme of this amplification process is the copying and depiction of amplifying societal ideas in mass-mediated representations (Bentley et al., 2011).

While social learning helps explain how ideas are amplified throughout a society, the advertiser is tasked with making rendition choices from among varied ideas. The selection of an appropriate ad rendition is made from available co-occurring, variant views about women. The logic that clarifies how choices are made from among variant ideas is addressed in the Hegelian dialectical framework (Young, 1972). An array of multiple and perhaps opposing viewpoints may exist relative to a specific cultural object at any point in time according to Hegel's notion of sublation or *Aufgehoben*. Sublation processes in some eras work to preserve or forward a culturally prevalent viewpoint while reducing or cancelling less prevalent ideas. Yet, at other times, multiple, or opposing conversations may be dealt with by reconciling and/or combining different positions or even intensifying one of the less prevalent viewpoints. In sum, one or more of the cultural viewpoints may be preserved and forwarded, while another viewpoint or position may be reduced or canceled out completely, and another variant viewpoint may be further intensified or modified (Young, 1972).

Emergent viewpoints have challenged conventional thinking through the years and have made their way into mass-mediated images. These dialectical conversations have produced changes from

traditional views about women as homemaker to less traditional viewpoints about societal roles and from modest exposure of the female body to more revealing displays (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; MacCurdy, 1994; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase, & Adkins, 2007; Whipple & Courtney, 1985). Three questions were framed to help refine the ultimate interpretation of how emergent socio-cultural viewpoints that challenge conventional ideas were given voice in female ad images:

RQ 1: What are the relevant historical events that provide socio-historical context for each era and what socio-cultural conversations helped to shape views about women?

RQ 2: What are the dominant and the emerging ideas within each period and from what cultural and socio-historical influences do they arise?

RQ 3: How was the negotiation of social roles and body images either amplified or inhibited by the prevailing historical context in ad strategies and how did those ad strategies exemplify negotiation of these tensions?

3. Methodology

Female images from print media were our archival choice to achieve the goal of analyzing mass-mediated images. The selection of sample frame was guided by a desire to select a frame reflecting a largely U.S. readership and an aggregate audience of men and women interested in current events, given a focus on socio-historical trends. Time Magazine was chosen for these reasons and because of its traceability over the 20th century. Time Magazine has maintained its dominance as the leading U.S. news magazine since inception in 1923, maintained a U.S. circulation of approximately 3.5 million copies annually through the 1970s (Gans, 1979), and continued to be the most widely read national news publication in the United States (Matsa, Rosenstiel, & Moore, 2011). Time Magazine appeals not only to women and men about equally but also to a broad population including the highly educated, blue-collar workers, and the national elite (Gans, 1979). Time Magazine debuted in March 1923 and in May, 1938, merged with Literary Digest which debuted in 1900. Both magazines were very similar during the 1930s in that they appealed to the same types of readers.

Only ads were selected depicting a female(s). Print ads were taken from Literary Digest between the years 1900 and 1937. The sample was taken from randomly selected issues during the beginning, middle, and end of each decade from 1900 through 2000 following Gross and Sheth (1989). Ads showing a female(s) were collected in every issue within one randomly selected month for each year sampled (i.e., 1900, 1903, 1907, etc.). The name of each month was placed on separate pieces of paper in a hat and an independent assistant drew out the selected month for each year of the study with replacement. There were 4 issues per month and in total, 120 issues were sampled and 1407 ads collected (4 issues per month per year X 30 years).

The year of the ad was recorded. To keep interpretations manageable, only the dominant female in each ad was measured. A female was considered dominant if the image occupied more ad space than other female images. Traditional vs. emergent role and extent of female body exposure was coded (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Reichert et al., 2007) based on the diffusion of two dominant socio-cultural conversations. Female role was coded as traditional if the female was shown in one or more of the following: (1) a traditional housewife engaged in activities or settings related to cooking, cleaning, tending the home, or taking care of the children and husband; (2) shown in a minor, compliant, secondary, or helpless role; (3) shown having things explained to her by a male(s) who was clearly more knowledgeable and in an authoritative role; (4) shown in a traditional manner but with a more prominent role at home or work; and (5) shown as the 'girl next door type.' The female role

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