

A critical analysis of
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A Critical Analysis of Feminist Theories Concerning the Representation of Women in Advertising. There are many forms of feminisms which often contradict each other and focus their efforts on issues which reflect their local concerns (Skeggs, 2004). Zoonen (1994) states that there are at least two notable themes which reoccur within feminist media theory, these are stereotypes and gender socialisation, and ideology.

These issues will be addressed with reference to several feminist theories to determine how women are represented in advertising. Pornography is considered by some to be a third theme which is a growing area of research for theorists (Zoonen, 1994: 15.) Some believe that these themes ' belong' to particular strands of feminism respectively liberal, radical and socialist feminism (Zoonen, 1994: 15. The classifications of political and theoretical strands work to differentiate the gamut of feminisms, Liberal feminism is largely attributed to political strategy concerns in the United States and has not incited as much theoretical analysis as the social and radical strands which are associated with Europe (Zoonen, 1994: 13) Whilst these strands have identified clear differences between feminisms they are now of less importance as each strand overlaps the other and encompasses a diverse range of positions (Eisenstein, 1981).

Throughout its history feminism has experienced a great deal of change both in the results of its actions and within its institution. The academic sphere first acknowledged feminism in the early 1970s when the collective effort of women to attain a more active role in public and academic matters was recognised (Byerly & Ross, 2006: 1.) The first wave of feminism pre dates

this and is characterised by the suffragette movement where women fought for their right to vote.

Second wave feminism focused on political structures and the oppression of women, it sought change in legislation and industry for equal rights. Third wave feminism was realised in the 1990s which, instead of opposing ideas brought forward in second wave feminism, built on existing movements and ideals, 'second and third waves of feminism are neither incompatible nor opposed' (Heywood & Drake, 1997). With such a broad spectrum of alternative theories, purposes and strands of identity it is difficult to summarise the meaning of feminism. Amongst the many attempts to define the word, Caroline

Ramazanoglu's provides one of the most encompassing statements describing feminism as, 'various social theories which explain the relations between the sexes in society, and differences between women's and men's experiences', theories 'which are also a political practice' (1989: 8) The aim to achieve equality in all aspects of women's citizenship is a quality of feminism which is recognised almost unanimously. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler highlight the importance of gender in society and believe that whatever your argument may be, consideration to gender must be given as it is key to the way society works (Zoonen, 1994: 484).

Her notions of sex and gender as socially malleable, a fluid variable which is subject to change has been revered by many and is often referred to in discussions of stereotypes and gender socialisation in advertising. As a vehicle for influencing social change and reflecting societies position on

gender identities, mass media and in particular advertising, for its persuasive nature, are important areas of analysis for Butler's theories. Butler describes gender as a performance where the act constitutes the reality, '... performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (2006: 25). She believes that our gendered identities are not a conscious choice but are socially constructed and formed by the performances of ourselves and others towards us, developed within a society where heterosexual hegemony is dominant. In a hetero-dominant world where traditional gender roles are enacted and re-enacted those roles are rendered as normative and form, as a by product, traditionalist, 'gender appropriate' behaviours.

People who enact gender performances which deviate from these 'norms' are subject to social punishment, this encompasses minority groups such as gay and transsexual, termed by Butler as 'queer' (2006 : 139) which could lead to our gendered identities forming out of a desire to fit into the 'norms' of society as opposed to them being ingrained within us. If as Butler suggests our gender is a product of our environment and the re enactment of perceived 'norms', then the role that mass media plays in representing gender is of great importance (Laughey, 2007). Butler's theories constitute an anti essentialist view, one which she shares with Simone de Beauvoir (1989) who states that 'one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman'. This constructionalist stand point suggests that women have some element of choice in the gender they chose to perform but are limited by the gender and behaviours which are made available to them. Beauvoir agrees that our gender is not predetermined by our sex but describes it as the incessant

materialising of possibilities, possibilities which are circumscribed by history and convention.

This statement supports that of Butler, ratifying the idea that our gender is influenced by culture and the gendered performances of our ancestors. The marginalised framing of women in stereotyped roles that media provides, undoubtedly reinforces hetero-normative gender roles and almost entirely ignores the discrete genders which, 'humanize individuals within contemporary culture' (2006: 903). The 'appropriate' behaviours that advertising projects not only marginalises how women perform their gender but also encourages the discrimination of women in industries or environments where the woman is significantly under represented.

Harding (1987) suggests that the repeated projection of men in positions of higher education and authority suggests those positions are exclusively for, or better suited to men. As a result whether intentionally implied or not the message makes the presence of women in these situations appear 'abnormal' and potentially creates internalized social restrictions within women. There are many studies and observations which support this criticism and prove that mediated images of women disproportionately emphasize traditional domestic roles or treat them as sexual objects (Byerly & Ross, 2004: 17).

A study concerning advertising in the 60's and 70's 42.6% of women were portrayed as household functionaries other high rating descriptions included dependent on men, submissive and demeaned housekeepers (Duker & Tucker, 1977: 469) In reaction to this feminists launched a persistent attack

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on advertisers who became far more wary of portraying women in a home makers role, by the early 1990s a report on UK advertising found that only 7% showed women in the kitchen (Strinati 1995: 186).

On the subject of stereotyping women ASA (1990) argues that for many people brought up in our cultural and erotic heritage, young women are nicer to look at than men, especially when they are naked. ' So it is natural and inevitable that permissiveness spreads to advertisements'. This argument is clearly formed within the mind of a heterosexual and highlights how hetero-normative sex roles are reinforced through media, Butler may argue that it is the historical representation of women in media that influences the culture and erotic heritage to which he is referring.

The idealised images of women in advertising are constructed in two distinct forms, the traditional housewife and the sex object (Byerly & Ross, 2004: 17), in recent years focus has shifted from the former and in to the latter with possession of an attractive body being cast as women's key source of identity (Gill, 2007). These bodies share a singular appearance which advertising draws upon as its exclusive female facade, beautiful, young, blemish and wrinkle free, a beauty which is virtually impossible for ' real' women to achieve.

Naomi Wolf compares the contemporary ideal of beauty to a medieval torture device in her 1991 book *The Beauty Myth*. The torture device known as the Iron Maiden enclosed victims in a spike lined box with a woman's image painted on the exterior. She claims that like the Iron Maiden, modern ideals of beauty cause suffering and even death in its victims. It is a known

fact that images of women which are delivered to us through advertisements are edited and air brushed beyond what we could comprehend as a natural beauty, this does not however prevent most women from fully subscribing to and comparing themselves to the look.

This Iron Maidens perfected image, erodes the self esteem of the viewer and then offers to sell it back to her with product or service on offer. Wolf is not the only feminist theorist to highlight advertisements promotion of an unachievable beauty, Jean Kilbourne (1990) makes an interesting comparison between women in advertising and mannequins, ' women are now expected to meet standards of physical perfection that only a mannequin could achieve'.

Her resemblance of women's representation to a mannequin incorporates a dual reference, not only does she refer to the unobtainable beauty women must emulate but also the lack of identity embodied in such representations, she speaks of the mannequin as a shell, where its beauty constitutes its identity. In a woman's adoption of these representations, as the ' perfect' model, she is assigning herself an impossible agenda, one in which she will undoubtedly fail inducing feelings of self dissatisfaction and shame, whether she attempts to achieve ' the look' or not.

She observes that regardless of the product or the intended audience all women including minority women, fit advertisements prerequisite of unnatural beauty. In the same context Kilbourne goes on to say that ' The mannequin has no depth, no totality; she is an aggregate of parts that have been made acceptable' this is in response to the sexual objectification of women and the

way in which advertising presents women's bodies as a composite of problems each requiring a product solution. (Gill, 2007).

The aggregate of parts is illustrated in advertising as the visual dissection of the body so the viewer sees only the lips, breasts or any fragmented part of the woman (Dyer, 1982; Coward 1984). Images which are presented in this way are termed as 'figures of the midriff' (Gill, 2008), its use is an obvious strategy for capturing the viewers attention but knowingly objectifies women by disconnecting their mind, soul and emotions from their body and placing them outside of any context (Cortese, 1999).

Objectification is not exclusive to women, there is a growing trend known as 'the rise of the raunch' (Gill, 2008), to which neither sex is immune. The objectification of women is considered far more dangerous than that of men due to the difference in power and control held by each sex, this affects the our decoding of such advertisements (Kilbourne, 1999).

Kilbourne uses the diet coke advert as an example of male objectification (1999: 279), a more recent example can be found in the latest Lindt chocolate advert (2010) which shows two security women confiscate the bag of a famous tennis player at an airport security gate. They find it is full of truffles and confiscate the chocolate before suggesting they do a strip search. In the extended version the man is then asked to turn around and the women comment, 'you must work out a lot'.

This advert is indicative of both male objectification and the stereotyping of women, the women are portrayed in positions of authority but this is

undermined by their irrational desire for chocolate and the man is objectified
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by their expressions of 'female gaze' which they employ upon him. The advert is intended as comical, depicting a scenario that doesn't reflect any truth in how women think or act, the man's body is powerful and as such is not threatened by the women, with this we can find humour in the advert.

By reversing the roles, placing a woman in the tennis player's position and men as the airport security guards, the advert takes on a much more sinister connotation. Kilbourne (1999) discusses how throughout history men have been accredited the right to 'ogle, to view women's bodies as property to be looked at, commented on, touched, perhaps eventually hit and raped.' This is a strong statement but one which she later attempts to justify with the comparable statistics of male and female sexual assaults, of which attacks on women are considerably higher. She goes on to explain that adverts depicting male objectification do not carry a real threat as the man could easily overpower the women, women who objectify men are only endangering themselves as the more venerable sex (1999: 281). Today advertisers are careful to avoid stigmatising women in traditional roles and if they do so, they do it knowingly with a satirical element that avoids persecution. Instead gender stereotypes and sexist messages are coded in a much more sophisticated manner, they portray women as confident sexual beings expressing their freedom through consumption of the product/service on offer.

This appears to manipulate the gender stigmatisation and assumptions that advertising is so intrinsically built on in a passive way that women are far more accepting of. As opposed to the oppression of women occurring through the strict ideologies projected by advertising, it now appears to be stemming <https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-analysis-of-feminist-theories-concerning-the-representation-of-women-in-advertising-essay/>

from women's self objectification which Kilbourne accredits to women's learned behaviour through being constantly objectified by others (Kilbourne 1990).

Laura Mulvey (1998) speaks of the female gaze, the woman's equivalent of the well established male gaze, although the female gaze is not specific to the objectification of men, in recent times it has also been used to describe how women look at each other and police the ideologies that a heterosexual society have constructed. The continued use of methods such as cropping, airbrushing and sexualising women in advertisements will undoubtedly influence societies perception of women and reinforce stereotypes that have no bearing on modern realities.

These practices appear out dated but are still widely employed by advertisers. Whilst the advertising industry is accused of evolving incredibly slowly in light of changes in women's roles, it has still made significant advances over the past 20 years, however, for the foreseeable future there will be increasing pressures for advertisements to depict women, their roles and identities in a balanced way that reflects the realities of being a woman in contemporary society.