

Gender stereotypes in advertising



The term “ gender stereotype” is used to denote a set of beliefs held about the characteristics, traits, behaviours and roles that, within a specific culture, are considered socially appropriate for men and women. This advertisement for Gardenburgers found in the August 1997 edition of the American magazine Vegetarian Times is reminiscent of the advertising of the 1950s. In this post World War II era, gender stereotyping was common in advertising. The emphasis was on male superiority and feminine domesticity and submissiveness. These stereotypes restricted men and woman to predetermined roles. Roles which, especially for women, were often degrading and humiliating.

Far from reinforcing the stereotypical gender representations of men and women during this era, this advertisement is, in fact, portraying the antithesis of these traditional stereotypes. It denounces the stereotype of the ideal woman of the 1950s, whose whole identity revolved around her house, her husband and her appearance. This advertisement turns the tables on man. It emasculates him and creates a sad little life for him in which, just like the women of the 1950s, he subordinates his interests to those of his wife. The hidden intent of this advertisement is to show that just as we should not accept how media constructs and reinforces traditional ideas about women and femininity and men and masculinity, we should not accept that the backyard barbecue is only complete with a traditional meat burger. Just as it is about time that the traditional gender stereotype that empowered men be replaced by a new gender stereotype that empowers women, it is about time that the traditional all American, all meat burger be replaced by the all natural, all vegetable Gardenburger. This advertisement is a satirical look at

gender stereotyping. The play on gender stereotypes, the reversal of gender roles is seen in the image used, the headline and the content of the copy.

The stereotypical American Dream, created in the 1950s, was to marry the perfect someone, to have a house in the suburbs complete with a white picket fence, an average 2.2 children, a dog and a cat, and to spend weekends in the backyard barbecuing. The image in the advertisement is intended to depict this American dream. You can almost see the white picket fence. While the proverbial man of the 1950s was bringing home the bacon, his wife was cooking it. The stereotypes in advertising in the 1950s limited the role of the woman. She was portrayed as the caring mother, the serving housewife, eager to please, without looking too intelligent. She was pretty and powerless, and she was usually placed in a subordinate position to her husband. However, in this image the stereotypical gender roles have been reversed. It is the man that has been domesticated. He is weak and innocent. With a humbly, obedient, closed mouthed, little smile on his face his ultimate goal is to be a good husband. His place is in the home, cooking and cleaning for his family. The woman, on the other hand, is displaying more active behaviour, a confident, opened mouthed smile and wave of the hand, she is exercising more authority. As if having an authoritarian wife is not emasculating enough, he is portrayed carrying a cooking utensil. All he is missing is his pinny.

The theme of advertising in the 1950s was one of contentment and complacency. Despite the degrading portrayal of women, and the disrespectful tone of many of the advertisements, the image conveyed was one of the perfect all American family where both mummy and daddy were

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happy in the roles society had assigned them. In this advertisement, the headline “ Fred and Fran are so happy” is parodying this idea. Satire is used here to show us that, in fact, in all is not well in the world, the line is even repeated at the end of the copy to highlight this contradiction. Even if “[t]hey are having a BBQ”, Fred and Fran should not be happy in an environment where gender inequalities exist. Just as the consumer should not be happy in an environment where animals are not respected, especially when meatless Gardenburgers are available wherever frozen foods are sold.

Finally, the content of the copy in this advertisement continues the satirical look at the gender inequality of advertising in the 1950s, where women were portrayed as stupid and infantile, men as dominant and macho. The copy in this advertisement is a far cry from the 1950s – the foot is now on the other shoe. According to our modern day susceptibility, the tone of the copy is actually quite condescending and offensive. However, just as the women in advertising in the 1950s were more like objects to be looked at, rather than intelligent people to be talked to, in this advertisement it is the man’s turn to be ‘dumbed down’. How, if he is considered too stupid to hold a job, is poor Fred expected to understand that it is possible to have burgers with no meat? From her position as provider, protector, and boss of the home “ Fran tells him to shut up and eat it already” and in his role as the perfect, submissive husband, always wanting to please his wife “ Fred always listens to Fran/He eats and eats and eats”. The colour and bold type in the first line of the copy “ Fred lights the fire! Fran claps her hands!” continues this idea of gender inequality. Fran condescendingly claps her hand as she is so amazed that Fred can actually light a fire.

This advertisement is trying to counter stereotyping by using satire to ridicule the stereotypes that are so prevalent in advertising. Media uses stereotypes as a quick way of getting an audience to understand a person or a group of people based on their class, race, gender, social class and/or occupation. However, by doing so they maintain social prejudices and inequalities. The Gardenburger advertisement wants to open the consumers eyes to the dangers of stereotyping. The advertisers hope that by using satire, irony, ridicule and exaggeration consumers will question stereotypes in advertising and think about ‘ healthy’ alternative advertisements that promote fairness and equality. Just as they are proposing a healthy alternative to the traditional all meat burger, which for decades the food industry has encouraged us to eat despite the dangers for our health.

Reference

Wholesome & Hearty Food, Inc. (1997, August). Gardenburgers. Vegetarian Times, p. 97