

How are 'masculinity' and 'femininity' represented in car advertisements



We are a culture with an abundance of advertisements. Indeed, according to James Twitchell¹, in Western culture the average adult comes into contact with over 3, 000 advertisements per day. Composing a large portion of the advertisements we see, are car advertisements. It is widely acknowledged that for years advertisements have used certain gender representations to target specific audiences (potential buyers).

Body images portrayed by the media (including car advertisements) through the use of imagery, the display of life-styles, and the reinforcement of values, are communicators of culturally defined concepts such as success, worth, love, sexuality, popularity, and normalcy. Of particular concern over the past two decades has been the excessive use of sexual stereotypes, especially those of women. Stereotypes are oversimplified conventional character, often gender, representations. Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary² defines "stereotype" as "a conventional, oversimplified conception, opinion, or image."

Throughout this essay I shall analyse the gender representations that underpin the discourse of car advertising in Australia. In particular, I shall focus on the use of male and female bodies as organizing metaphors which produce a gendered framework for advertising different types of cars. I shall consider who the advertisements are targeted at (whether they are targeted at a particular gender) and what such advertisements reveal about the ways in which 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are shaped within the spaces of everyday life, taking into consideration the affects and influences they have on society.

Since there are so many different car advertisements, I shall focus on those found in the West Australian newspaper³, the Sunday Times newspaper⁴ and on television⁵, as these media are assumed gender neutral. According to A. E. Courtney and T. W. Whipple in their 1983 edition of *Sex Stereotyping in Advertising*, "Advertisements are full of stereotypes" ⁶. I shall begin my study by looking at stereotyping in car advertisements and challenging this claim. My study, like Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*, is devoted to what Goffman describes as a "pictorial pattern analysis" ⁷ of the presentation of gender in advertisements.

The use of collections of photographs has the considerable advantage of allowing subtle features of gender displays to be exhibited, not merely described. I shall investigate the effect produced by the interaction between text as caption and artfully sequenced arrays of photographs in the car advertisements. I shall also challenge Goffman's proposition that advertisements exploit women's sexuality to sell a product⁸. A first example gender stereotyping is that of the female sex object. The Renault Megane advertisement⁹, portrays a highly sexualized representation of femininity, featuring a young model wearing a very short, tight-fitting dress that expresses her sexuality. The caption "Get the figure you've always dreamed of" is a clever play on words, referring to both the shapely model and the shapely car. It is clearly aimed at women, suggesting to them that by buying the car they'll "get the figure they've always dreamed of" as they'll drive and be inside such a sleek, attractive car.

This also implies that by driving such a car, they'll obtain a highly desirable image and reputation, like the model who is assumed to drive that car. The <https://assignbuster.com/how-are-masculinity-and-femininity-represented-in-car-advertisements/>

advertisement conveys the advantages to women of buying the Renault Meggane by communicating the culturally desirable concepts of sexuality, beauty and popularity. The advertisement for the Citroen Xsara¹⁰ also portrays women as sex objects who are primarily concerned with their image. It features supermodel Claudia Schiffer seductively undressing, ending up naked, and displays the caption, " The only thing to be seen in this summer.

The successful and financially secure male stereotype is portrayed in the BMW M3 advertisement¹¹, which features a good-looking young male executive, dressed in a suit, driving the car at what appears to be a high speed. He conveys the culturally defined concepts of success, worth and wealth. This advertisement concentrates on the technical, mechanical advantages, as opposed to those of the individual's image. Technology is conventionally a masculine concept, and this, along with the fact that the advertisement features a man, suggests that it is aimed at men.

A second example of this stereotype is found in the Porsche 911 advertisement¹², which again features a man and concentrates on the technology and mechanics of the car. The female stereotype of the housewife and mother is represented in a number of car advertisements, including that for the Toyota Tarago¹³. This advertisement shows a stressed mother frantically trying to get her children out the house and into the car. Once she is driving, she looks very happy and relaxed, seemingly unaware of her children squabbling in the back.

It is evidently targeted at mothers, a point which is highlighted by the fact that the advertisement emphasizes the safety, convenience and practicality of the vehicle - factors we see as women's concerns - rather than " speed, performance and handling," which are factors we associate with men¹⁴. The stereotype of the adventurous, heroic, wild male is evident in the Freelander advertisement¹⁵. It pictures a man driving the four-wheel-drive across a rugged terrain in the wild. The caption, " Freelander. Get your hands on one" complements the convention that men like to use their hands and tend to take the " hands-on" approach to situations.

This advertisement conveys the stereotype of the brave, heroic man, thus targeting men. It conveys the typically male desire of machoism. A second car advertisement using this stereotype is that for the Volkswagen Golf¹⁶, which shows a man braving the bad weather to admire the car.

Nevertheless, most advertisements did not use traditional methods of stereotyping. For example, the advertisement for the Ford Fiesta¹⁷ features a businesswoman, while that for the Jeep Cherokee¹⁸ portrays a good-looking topless man as the object of the female gaze. Furthermore, there was a marked absence of human beings in numerous car advertisements.

An example of this lies in the advertisement for the Porsche Boxter¹⁹, which appears to be driving itself. My study reveals that about thirty percent of the car advertisements found in the the West Australian newspaper, the Australian Sunday Times newspaper and on television use stereotyping, suggesting that A. E. Courtney and T. W. Whipple's statement that " Advertisements are full of stereotypes" ²⁰ is an exaggeration of the truth.

However, I must take into consideration that their book was written in 1983 and much has since changed in society and the advertising world.

I agree with Goffman in that advertisements, in this case those for the Renault Megane and the Citroen Xsara, sometimes exploit women's sexuality to sell a product. I propose that these car advertisements are attacking the newfound vulnerability of women that arose with the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. My research corroborates Greg Myers' theory that advertisements featuring or focusing on one gender are usually targeting that gender²¹. For example the Renault Megane advertisement features a woman and the caption " Get the figure you've always dreamed of" and is clearly targeting women.

Advertisements targeting different genders are advertised in different ways; those targeting men tend to focus on power and adventure, while those aimed at women usually concentrate on image, comfort, convenience and practicality. Furthermore, different types of cars are often targeted at specific genders. They are therefore advertised in different ways, with different gender representations; fast, powerful cars are usually aimed at men and family cars and attractive, comfortable, practical cars tend to be aimed at women.

It is thus clear that gender representations do underpin these advertisements, producing a gendered framework for advertising different types of cars. Nevertheless, it is likely that the sexual images of women in car advertisements would also attract the male gaze. I consequently argue that such advertisements, although primarily targeting women, are designed

to attract both sexes. So how do car advertisements conveying specific gender representations influence and affect society and what do they reveal about the ways in which 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are shaped within the spaces of everyday life?

In my view, the methods of persuasion used in advertising, instead of concentrating on the actual product, usually concentrate on the benefits that will be brought to the consumer. The advertisements play on the personal, emotional desires or interests of the audience they are targeting. For example, they tend to focus on image and style when aiming at women and power and adventure when aiming at men. I believe that the portrayal of such beautiful models in the media (including car advertisements) provokes an image obsession within women and often causes them to feel that they have to compete with the models.

In extreme cases, this can lead to eating disorders and depression. Indeed, in *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf remarks that as the media increasingly exploited women's sexuality (by portraying stunning, slim models), "eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty" 22. Wolf adds that "Even the most independent of women has these taught feelings of inadequacy and objectification, which have been instilled by the media" 23. My opinion of women in car advertisements echoes Gary R. Brooks's statement in *The Centerfold Syndrome* that "It is my contention that this mania, this explosion in glorification and objectification of women's bodies, promotes unreal images of women, distorts physical reality [and] creates an obsession with visual stimulation" 24. Many people support Diane Halpern's argument in [Sex](https://assignbuster.com/how-are-masculinity-and-femininity-represented-in-car-advertisements/)

Differences in Cognitive Abilities that representations of femininity " are misused in ways that support a misogynist agenda" 25. I believe, however, that this is a vast exaggeration.

I argue that female stereotyping does not " support a misogynist agenda," but simply reflects pre-feminism reality, where women were regarded as mere objects of male desire and housewives and mothers. In my view, the media overload of degrading and objectifying women is the cause of society thinking that this practice is acceptable and accurate, when, in reality, it is an outdate practice that needs to be corrected. In spite of this, I admit that more and more people are now recognizing traditional female stereotyping as unacceptable and inaccurate.

In *The Centerfold Syndrome*, Gary Brooks tells how the manner in which men relate to women's bodies is known as the " Centerfold Syndrome" 26. The portrayal of beautiful, slender models in the media, including Australian car advertisements, creates " unrealistic fantasies and expectations, imposing profound distortions on how men relate with women and to women's bodies, and in turn, how women relate to their physical selves and with men" 27. When men realize that the majority of women in our " realistic" society don't have these perfect bodies and element of mystery, they feel inadequate, as if their manhood has been attacked²⁸.

Likewise, when women are unable to live up to the grotesquely thin vision of today's " beauty," they suffer from the pressure of being unable to satisfy their partners, and they too feel inadequate²⁹. In *Gentleman and a Consumer* Diane Barthel says to be a man is to be independent, to savor

freedom, live a life of adventure, and to keep one's cool³⁰. These concepts are demonstrated in the BMW and the Freelander advertisements. This media manipulation is the only provision men are given to follow, as women are given similar "rules" of passivity, physical beauty, and timidity to follow.

Barthel says, "The growing fascination with appearances, encouraged by advertising, has led to a 'feminization' of culture. We are all put in the classic role of the female: manipulable, submissive, seeing ourselves as objects" ³¹. I am accordant with this statement to an extent, yet I believe that this still applies to women far more than it does to men. Nevertheless, men also feel the need to be comparable to those featured in the advertisements. They strive to appear successful, financially stable, adventurous and heroic.

However, whereas in the past the automobile industry has been extremely male dominated, in her article in Advertising Age Alice Z. Cuneo reveals that "61% of all buyers under 25 are themselves female" and "influence 80% of all car purchases" ³². According to Janice Leeming, editor-in-chief of the newsletter Marketing to Women, young single women "seem to worry less... [and are]... are less concerned about planning [their finances] for the future," ³³ so one can understand why the auto industry is so interested in the female market.

Indeed, my study showed that a large proportion of the advertisements were aimed at women. This indicates why an increasing number of car advertisements are targeting women rather than men and why they are becoming less stereotyped. Furthermore, I believe that this is also the reason for the increasing absence of human beings in car advertisements: As the

ratio of male to female consumers in the automobile industry is almost equal, advertisers and marketers are making gender neutral advertisements in order to capture a wider audience.

Assuredly, most car advertisements in the Australian newspaper, the Australian Sunday Times and on television did not feature a person. My findings support Lynnaire Johnston's comment in his article Women in the Driver's Seat that " to adapt to the new market for female buyers of automobiles, advertisers are increasingly breaking the molds that have subtly targeted the market towards men" 34. But do representations of " masculinity" and " femininity" in car advertisements reflect society or is it the reverse?

Having carried out extensive research, I have come to the conclusion that they reflect each other. Advertisements using stereotypes tend not to reflect today's society, but reflect traditional society; women as sex objects, housewives and mothers and men as the dominant breadwinners. I studied old car advertisements and noted that the vast majority were aimed at men and featured stereotypical women³⁵. Yet since the feminism boom that hit the 1960s and 70s, the use of stereotyping in car advertisements has gradually reduced.

Car advertisements are increasingly reflecting modern society, portraying people realistically. For example, women are portrayed in modern roles, such as businesswomen, as well as sex objects, housewives and mothers. In addition, men's modern interest in their image is also expressed. An example

of this lays in the Toyota Rav4 advertisement, which displays the text " It's one thing to climb a mountain. It's quite another to look good doing it" 36.

Yet society reflects car advertisements in that people often strive to achieve the image of the models featured in them, by buying the car and changing (or trying to change) their physical appearance. I believe that each advertisement mirrors Goffman's view that the interaction between text as caption and artfully sequenced arrays of photographs complement each other, co-opting the reader in a vivid and compelling way³⁷. It is often this intertwining of text and photography that produces either the gender representations or the gender neutrality in the car advertisements and determines who they are targeting.

I conclude that although representations of " masculinity" and " femininity" still dominate a number of car advertisements, today most car advertisements are gender neutral, targeting both men and women. Since the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, traditional stereotyping in car advertisements has continued to diminish, but is still used. I believe that stereotyping will exist in advertising for years to come, but will change to reflect society (for example, the successful working mother may become a stereotype).

Yet the media still dictates how members of today's society should act and treat the opposite sex. In the past and, to an extent, in post-modern society, it has painted genders and beauty in a light so unrealistic that when reality is faced, individuals feel unacceptable or disappointed. The cultural admonition that living up to today's gender standards that the media sets is the only

way to be socially acceptable is a false belief that needs to be abolished, if not by the controlling media, then by the educated public.