

Less Laundry and More Lipstick: an exploration of domestic labour portrayals in outdoor advertising

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Abstract

The notion of women being portrayed in advertising as being engaged in traditional domestic chores such as homemaking and child-rearing is an outdated idea. Based on findings from a dataset of 137 outdoor advertisements featuring female central characters (collected as part of a PhD dissertation and subsequent book), it can be asserted that in fact women are seldom ever portrayed undertaking any kind of domestic labour activity in the traditional definition of the concept. This said, while women may rarely be portrayed as housewives, their portrayals are still very much concerned with domestic labour, but that the kind of domestic labour portrayed needs to be reconceptualised. Radical feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys writes of the concept of the “sexual corvée” which describes the unpaid, beauty-related chores that women engage in within patriarchal society to be attractive to men (Jeffreys, 2005). This paper asserts that it is these beauty-related chores that allude to the contemporary domestic work being carried out by women in outdoor advertising.

This paper explores the content of 137 outdoor advertisements, exploring the ways women are portrayed and the products that they are being used to market which help demonstrate how the “sexual corvée” has replaced traditional notions of domestic labour. Images of women involved in grooming for example, help illustrate the activity of domestic beauty labour, whilst the high number of women portrayed as “free-floating” (i.e., portrayed against a neutral background completely disconnected from any kind of location or context) help illustrate the actual outcomes of this new labour and the results of which audiences are expected to find inspiration and aspiration.

Introduction

Feminist concern regarding advertising imagery dates back at least forty years to Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* where the author expressed concern over advertising’s limited and sexist portrayals of women as glamorised housewives and happy consumers (Friedan, 1963). My research focuses on outdoor advertising, a medium that is the most obvious and unavoidable of all advertising, but is one that is very under-researched. In a content analysis of outdoor advertising conducted throughout 2003 for a PhD dissertation and subsequent book (Rosewarne, 2007) I determined that forty years on from Friedan’s book, while portrayals of housewives in outdoor advertising may be an anachronism, the idea of women being portrayed as consumers continues. The consumers Friedan described however, were depicted in connection with goods related to traditionally-defined domestic labour such as cooking and cleaning. The consumers in contemporary outdoor advertisements however, are preoccupied with goods relating to a different, albeit similarly gendered, kind of domestic labour: beauty chores. In her 1991 tome *The Beauty Wolf*, Naomi Wolf claimed that a preoccupation with beauty has replaced domesticity as the focal point of women’s lives and definitions in contemporary culture

(Wolf, 1991). While the findings of my content analysis certainly support the notion of a focus on beauty rather than domesticity, this paper contends that the outdoor advertising medium itself poses a unique set of problems, notably that the medium displays information about what it means to function as a woman outside of the home in a very public and unavoidable way by placing prescriptive images of such on a public canvas. This paper similarly contends that in spite of the undisputed role beauty has in the contemporary definition of woman, that domesticity hasn't actually been replaced as an essential aspect of a woman's life, rather, that it has simply been redefined. That just as the housewives in Friedan's book had to fill their lives with household labour activity (Friedan, 1963), contemporary women have to fill their lives with *beauty* labour. This paper asserts that the same patriarchal motivations behind the traditional domestic chores undertaken by Friedan's housewives are motivating the beauty chores undertaken by the women featured in my outdoor advertising.

Findings from the dataset

Throughout 2003, every outdoor advertisement passed during my daily commuting to and from my place of employment that contained an identifiable central male or central female character was photographed (see Rosewarne, 2007, for more information on the dataset and methodology). Of the 177 advertisements photographed, 137 contained obvious central female characters. Each advertisement was subjected to a content analysis which eventually determined that the vast majority of women portrayed were young, thin, white and idle. These women tended to be photographed in ways that focused on their body in its entirety rather than their faces, thus inferring physiques were more important than personalities (see Archer *et al*, 1983, for a more detailed discussion of this idea). Women tended to be used as decorative and attention getting figures rather than as characters that were included to lend authority to the product being marketed. Another trend was that women were frequently portrayed as posing, as opposed to actually participating in any kind of activity. Very few advertisements featured women marketing products related to the home, instead, they tended to feature in advertisements for clothing and footwear (40% of advertisements); media and entertainment (20% of advertisements) and personal/beauty care (14.5% of advertisements). Only three advertisements in the dataset featured women in a home setting (2% of advertisements) and only five showed women in occupational settings (3.5% of advertisements). The majority of women portrayed were photographed in studio settings or against a neutral background (i.e., with no reference to setting or identity). Other trends included portrayals of women as naked (9.5% of advertisements); as wearing lingerie/underwear (9.5% of advertisements) or wearing swimwear (9.5% of advertisements).

Review of presentations of traditional domesticity in advertising

While large content analyses of outdoor advertising have not been previously conducted, extensive research on advertising in other media, such as magazines and television, exists. Such research reveals that women are more likely than men to be included in advertisements for products related to the home, and are more likely to be photographed in domestic settings. In content analyses of television advertising for example, Dominick and Rauch, as well as O'Donnell and O'Donnell, note that women are most often presented in advertisements for household products (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978). Bartsch *et al*'s study of television commercials similarly indicated that females were over-represented in advertisements for domestic products and males were over-represented as representatives for non-domestic products. The

authors noted that this trend was more identifiable in their study than it was in research undertaken ten years prior (Bartsch *et al*, 2000). Uray and Burnaz's research on Turkish television advertisements similarly indicated that women were most likely to be primary characters in body and home products advertisements, whereas men tended to advertise cars and accessories, financial services and food and drink (Uray & Burnaz, 2003). In terms of occupational portrayals, Nowak in his research on Swedish advertising, found that men were three times more likely than women to be portrayed as involved with employment (Nowak, 1990). Holmqvist in his study on Swedish advertising, similarly found that in advertisements from 1988 as compared to 1980, there was an increase in the disparity between numbers of males portrayed in working roles as compared to women (Holmqvist, 1989).

Research undertaken by Mastin *et al* on gender roles claimed that women in magazine advertisements are only allowed three roles: making purchasing decisions related to their appearance, their children or their home (Mastin *et al*, 2004). While purchases related to children or home are repudiated by my dataset, the idea of purchases related to appearance is certainly applicable and helps to bolster the idea of the focus on women's role as consumer, but more specifically, their participation in the "sexual corvée", as will be discussed later in this paper.

Allan and Coltrane, in their comparison of portrayals of men and women in television commercials from the 1950s and 1980s, noted that in the more recent advertisements 70% of women were pictured as "free-floating" – i.e., that their display was without reference to work or family activity (Allan & Coltrane, 1996). While the authors do not extensively explain this phenomena, the "free-floating" concept does provide an interesting way to think about the 67 images in my dataset of women being presented against a neutral background, thus providing audiences no information about the character's location or identity (not to mention the 26 advertisements in the dataset where the setting was indeterminable). Interestingly, the results of the Allan & Coltrane study coincide with the findings of more recent content analyses (Peirce & McBride 1999; Peirce 2001; Kwangok & Lowry 2005).

The next section of the paper will examine what the portrayals in my dataset might reveal about the kinds of activity women are expected to be involved with and what a feminist analysis might reveal about such trends.

The decline in traditionally-defined domestic labour

My dataset shows a blatant absence of images of women engaged in traditionally-defined domestic labour. Put simply, women in outdoor advertising are not shown to be engaged with cooking or cleaning or mothering. Firstly, a lack of portrayals of women actually engaged in traditionally-defined domestic activity obviously does not mean that women are not still engaged in domestic activity in real life: women's high-life involvement in unpaid duties around the home is not contentious, as research readily indicates. Scott Coltrane for example, analysed ten years of research on household labour in the United States and noted that women continued to perform two to three times more household labor than men (Coltrane, 2000). In other countries, the ratio is similar, or even higher (Corrigall & Konrad, 2006). While women may still be doing the majority of domestic labour, images of women engaged in it are absent from the dataset. The reasons behind this need to be explored.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan lamented the glamorised housewife images so common in advertising in the 1950s and 1960s (Friedan, 1963). Despite of the successes of contemporary television shows such as *Desperate Housewives* and the novelty factor of housewifery that the show has purportedly inspired (Mundy, 2006), the notion of the glamorous housewife is largely an anachronism in contemporary culture. The “perfect home”-type objectives motivating the housewives that Friedan discussed, and the images of women who are, to quote feminist advertising critic Jean Kilborne, “pathologically obsessed by cleanliness” (Kilborne, 1990, n.p.), arguably do not inspire contemporary women. Townsend and O’Neil in their research on the effectiveness of advertising in fact found that many women stated that they no longer actually desired to manage work and home without help from their spouse (Townsend and O’Neil, 1990). Perhaps the quest to be a perfect wife and perfect mother is an outdated idea and thus such portrayals are absent from the dataset.

Another explanation for the lack of domestic labour portrayals relates to the economics of advertising. The dollar value of the beauty industry is difficult to measure but it is estimated to be worth somewhere between £6 billion (Day, 2005) and £15 billion worldwide (Lister, 2005). In Australia, the domestic beauty market is estimated at \$A1.2 billion (Swinburn, 2005). While dollar statistics on the value of the cleaning product industry are difficult to obtain, it is thought that approximately £10 billion is spent annually on cleaning products in the United Kingdom alone (Yarrow, 2006). On the basis of these (albeit incomplete figures), arguably the cleaning product business is far more lucrative than cosmetics. Interestingly however, advertisements for cleaning products – or in fact any products related to the home at all – are absent from my dataset. Considering the size of the cleaning products market, one might assume advertising dollars would be more readily spent on marketing the wares of an already lucrative market. Of course, advertising is not so simple. Firstly, amongst the many goals of advertising, creating a desire for a product is one of the most important objectives (Bendixen, 1992). Cosmetics are not an essential item in the way that dishwashing detergent is, rather, they are a luxury good and sales are motivated by wants and desires rather than need. Richard Ohmann’s book *Selling Culture*, charts advertising’s role in consumption particularly well. Ohmann argues that at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the U.S. was producing too many goods for too few buyers, advertising solved the capitalist crisis by creating new categories of consumers and new categories of goods to appeal to them (Ohmann, 1996). This idea highlights an important goal of advertising: to create new markets where a market didn’t exist previously. In relation to beauty labour, the situation could be illustrated by the beauty industry constantly upping the ante on what constitutes an “undesirable” physical attribute and then marketing a range of remedies. This is a point well made by feminist writer Sandra Bartky who claims that advertisements for cosmetics might appear to simply be about promoting a brand and product, but are also simultaneously working to make audiences feel bad so that products need to be purchased to fix their maladies: i.e., that the industry works to “depreciate woman’s body and deal a blow to her narcissism” so that more products will be consumed (Bartky, 1990, p. 39). While already lucrative, the possibility of expanding the cosmetics market is as infinite as a woman’s desire to look ever more perfect. These same motivations are non-existent in the cleaning product market.

Another explanation for the predominance of images for, and those reflecting the practices of, the beauty industry, is the nature of the medium itself. The very nature of outdoor advertising means that it is positioned outside of the home. Given that cleaning product-type advertisements are absent from outdoor advertising, it must be assumed

that they are being published somewhere else: print media and television seem likely locations. *BBC News* writer John Camm mocks a very familiar advertising gender stereotype regarding domesticity:

Any act of male stupidity (e.g. walking across a clean floor in muddy boots, putting the dog in the dishwasher, etc.) will be met with a wry smile, not genuine annoyance/anger (Camm, 2005, n.p.)

While such an image has immediate resonance with advertising audiences, as my dataset would indicate, this is not the kind of image present in *outdoor* advertising, rather is a very television-specific stereotype. It could, therefore, be contended that products associated with domesticity, with the domestic lives of women *inside* the home, tend only to be featured in media that is consumed *inside* the home. Therefore, the images that appear on outdoor advertisements are arguably showing the *public* preoccupations of women which tend to be those images associated with appearance. Using the idea of the “sexual corvée”, this paper will later assert that this beauty quest has become a new kind of obligatory domestic work for women conducted for their public lives and one that is equally onerous and as labour intensive as traditionally-defined domestic labour.

Lack of presentations of workforce labour

Given that images of women engaged in traditionally-defined domestic labour are absent from the dataset, one might expect that, particularly given the public space nature of the outdoor advertising medium, that advertising might instead include images of women engaged in the kind of roles occupied outside of the home: i.e., paid employment. This however, is not the case. Existing research (Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976; Allan & Coltrane, 1996; Peirce & McBride 1999; Peirce 2001; Kwangok & Lowry 2005) note that despite social changes occurring in the real world, presentations of women both in traditionally-defined domestic labour as well as out-of-home labour, are in decline. While previous content analyses of outdoor advertising have not been done (thus change-over-time can not be ascertained), my research certainly indicates that portrayals of women participating in the labour market are rarities in outdoor advertising. Despite the social changes that have occurred since the publication of Friedan’s book - including the dramatic increase of women into the workforce and, more specifically, into professions once dominated by men (Kang, 1997) - outdoor advertising does not reflect this situation.

Interestingly, while my research, and existing research, asserts that advertising has not kept abreast of social changes, advertisers frequently allege the contrary, routinely making bold claims about advertising strategies targeting contemporary women in all of their various roles:

Today’s major advertising agencies and their clients are making a decided effort to banish old stereotypes and lure the female consumer with images that reflect her more professional lifestyle and more educated attitudes... as women’s roles in society have evolved over the past two decades or so, advertisers are scrambling to mirror those changes (Solomon, 1990, p. 11).

Jaffe and Berger in their research on advertising similarly document a supposed trend in portrayals of women as “superwoman”, thus reflecting social changes of career and family management (Jaffe & Berger, 1994). Firstly, despite what marketers may allege, social changes are not immediately apparent in outdoor advertising. This said, the idea of advertisers alleging to “respond” to changes brought about by feminism – even if advertising images don’t actually reflect this - is not a recent, or even 90s development. As Kilbourne argues in her criticism of advertising, *Can’t Buy My Love*, in the 1960s and

70s advertisers saw a marketing opportunity of changes brought about by the women's movement and exploited the Zeitgeist in their advertising strategies: she discusses the Virginia Slims "You've come a long way, baby" cigarette campaign as one such example (Kilbourne, 1999). Of course, even despite the inclusion of potentially "progressive" copy, the Virginia Slims advertisements were not actually transgressive in any meaningful way: they still focused on the appearance of women and still used attractiveness, cosmetics, feminine attire and slim bodies to draw attention to a product. Of course, the advertising industry wasn't aiming to actively change culture through these advertisements, rather, was simply exploiting the changes that were already occurring in society and incorporating them into marketing strategies.

While women are participating in the workforce in higher numbers than ever before (Office of the Status of Women, 2004), despite what the industry might purport, in my outdoor advertising study, only five images in a dataset of 137 showed women in assumed occupational settings. The lack of occupational-type portrayals certainly needs to be investigated.

Nowak argues that the over-arching goal of advertising is to create positive sentiments about the product advertised and that if controversial advertising imagery is used, a negative connotation about the product may occur in the minds of the audience (Nowak, 1990). Another explanation for the absence of images of women in occupational settings could be women's *own* negative responses to such images. Hochschild, in a study of advertising effectiveness, noted that women responded negatively to images of the "superwoman" with the women claiming that they couldn't relate to advertising depictions showing the "ease" of juggling so many roles as is often portrayed in advertising (Hochschild, 1989). While an interesting argument, images of a "superwoman" are not the same thing as showing a woman in an occupational setting, thus the relevancy of the Hochschild argument is moot.

Another important explanation for the lack of occupational portrayals in advertising is the arguable dream-like, inspirational intentions of the medium: i.e., advertising is about depicting a lifestyle for audiences to desire, and not one that actually reflects their reality. Wiles *et al* in their research on advertising connect the inspirational qualities of advertising to the focus on images connected to feel-good activity (i.e., "leisure" rather than employment):

advertisers present pictures of the world which are free from conflict, idyllic, and false. Due to the abundance of ads portraying leisure, life is depicted as leisure while work is a necessary evil. In addition, life is depicted as consumption, not activity or work (Wiles *et al*, 1996, p. 58).

A similar point is made by Anderson *et al* in their discussion of cigarette advertising, notably a campaign for Satin cigarettes which in 1982 positioned itself, according to manufacturer Lorillard, to

communicate to working women as well as housewives that they deserve some time for themselves; time to relax and spoil themselves in some manner and to further foster the moment is to smoke Satin cigarettes (in Anderson *et al*, 2005, n.p.).

According to Lorillard, the Satin advertisements targeted "highly feminine" women who "shared a need for private, self indulgent, escapism" and thus that the cigarettes were marketed as a way to "pamper yourself... The desire to relax with a cigarette... The generally suppressed dream of relaxing in luxury" (in Anderson *et al*, 2005, n.p.). The

advertisements in my dataset do not show the “superwoman”, nor do they depict harried women attempting to “have it all”. Thus, arguably the urgent need to pamper or reward oneself with a purchase is not immediately obvious through my dataset. Of course, decades have past since the Virginia Slims and Satin campaigns and arguably contemporary audiences are more media literate (Fowles, 1996) and have had years to learn the “superwoman” image by heart and thus the image of women working at home *and* in the labour market is one we know well, thus perhaps showing images of it is superfluous. Perhaps nowadays we need only see the images of women’s rewards and pleasures because we know too well the drudgery that motivated such desires.

Linking to the idea about increased media literacy is the idea that the kinds of lifestyles and commodities being portrayed in advertising *infers* that a woman *has* to be working to afford them. In her article on television advertisements shown during screenings of television show *Ally McBeal*, Christine E. Crouse-Dick notes a very low number of advertisements which depicted or referred to young professional working women, claiming that on the surface this might indicate that the advertisements did not target young professional working women. However, as the author surmises there are actually cues in the advertisements indicating that while they may not be explicitly depicted or referred to, young professional women are most definitely the target audience for these commercials:

First, the majority of models, actresses, and actors appear to be between the ages of 18 and 35. Second, there is a low occurrence of stereotypical “homemaker” products... Third, a middle- to upper-class level of income is necessary to achieve the lifestyles promoted in the advertisements. And fourth, the commercials air during a show whose premise is about the life of a young professional female (Crouse-Dick, 2002, p. 21).

Crouse-Dick’s idea of necessary income is important to this paper. Perhaps, audiences realise that to afford the products advertised and the lifestyles promised, employment is necessary and showing images of such would be superfluous.

While both unpaid and paid labour are activities that are largely absent from the dataset, activity of *any* kind appear to be absent too, as the next section will discuss.

Lack of activity in advertising

Whitelock and Jackson argue that men are more active in television advertisements than women (Whitelock and Jackson, 1997). O’Kelly presents similar findings for depictions of children in television advertising noting that boys tend to be more active than girls (O’Kelly, 1974). Mary E. Duquin in her research on images of women in fashion magazines, found that females were more likely than males to be nonactive: i.e., the body was either shown sitting, lying, or standing (Duquin, 1989). Allan and Coltrane’s research followed a similar line, indicating that while in the 1950s, 50% of both men and women were pictured in either a job or parenting, by the 1980s, while 50% of all men continued to engage in work or parenting activity the percentage of women doing either activity dropped to 30% (Allan & Coltrane, 1996). As noted, my dataset does not show many images of women engaged in domestic or occupational labour. In fact, they are seldom portrayed doing anything at all.

Referring back to Allan and Coltrane’s concept of the “free-floater” in advertising (Allan & Coltrane, 1996), the most common setting for a woman in my data collection was against a neutral background. More often than not, the woman was sitting or standing or

posing and seldom was any activity occurring. The most obvious feminist explanation for the “free-floating” woman could be the emphasis on her non-entity status (Dworkin, 2000, n.p.): i.e., if women were shown in a workplace or in the home or portrayed as involved in any kind of activity one may be given insight into her identity: something that would be a wasted effort if the real focus is her appearance and her ability to draw attention to an advertisement rather than lend it authority (Rosewarne, 2007).

The idea of women being portrayed as idle and passive is the most common of feminist criticisms of advertising whereby a woman’s worth is pinned to her ability to draw attention to a product. The prevalence of such images in the contemporary advertising landscape shows just how little progress has been made since Friedan’s criticisms were first presented.

Advertising and the “sexual corvée”

In *Beauty and Misogyny*, Sheila Jeffreys discusses the “sexual corvée” which describes unpaid, beauty-related chores that women engage in within patriarchal society to be attractive to men (Jeffreys, 2005). Domestic labour, occupational labour and activity in the broadest sense are absent from my dataset. The images that do feature promptly are presentations of women engaged in, or shown to be donning the results of, beauty-related labour: there’s the woman in the bikini eyeing herself in the mirror in the Dior Addict fragrance advertisement; there’s the naked woman soaping herself in the Palmolive Tranquility shower gel advertisement; there’s the woman toweling her décolletage and the woman toweling her neck in the Rexona Body Refreshers advertisements. And there are the dozens of other advertisements featuring primped and preened women who are made-up and coiffed and incredibly slender, displaying the aesthetic results of the extensive beauty labour they have engaged in.

The concept of the “sexual corvée” assumes that beauty-related labour is being undertaken is being done to be attractive to men. Perhaps more clearly than in any other kind of advertising, the outdoor medium facilitates this. In *Sex in Public*, I contend that many contemporary outdoor advertisements look like, and function in a manner similar to, pin-ups (Rosewarne, 2007). Images of beautiful posing women who are decorating advertisements for a range of products that are frequently unrelated to their appearance are pervasive in public space. I have previously alleged that these kinds of displays reflect a long tradition of images of women being used to decorate public space (Rosewarne, 2005). This idea is well described by architecture theorist Joel Sanders:

By identifying manliness as “genuine” and womanliness as “artifice”, architects since Vitruvius have associated the ornamented surface with femininity, not masculinity (Sanders, 1996, p. 79).

Just as the personalities of women in pin-ups and pornography are irrelevant, just as the settings and their personal relationships or occupations are unimportant given that their primary objective is to titillate the consumer, arguably a very similar thing is happening with the images of women in outdoor advertising. These women are not included for reasons more complicated than simply arousing the interest of the passerby and in the process, ideally, connecting arousal to the product they are placed next to.

Conclusion

Despite the reality of women’s participation in the labour market, despite the reality of women’s ongoing involvement in domestic chores, outdoor advertising seldom portrays

images of either activity. Women in outdoor advertising tend to be young, white and thin, but most notably, they tend to be idle. Women are presented as primped and preened: as the finished product of high-level participation in the “sexual corvée”. They are presented as women whose central function is to be attractive to the men who pass the billboards on which their images reside. Despite over forty years of feminist research and activism regarding the portrayals of women, evidently little positive headway has been made.

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