

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sex sells – or does it?

Key issues

- Globalisation of the media enforces “globalised norms” of gender.
- The lowest single common denominator in “global” images of gender is that “sex sells”.
- “Sex sells” builds and reinforces stereotypes and bias – both male and female.



Photo: Trevor Davies

Introduction

The commercialisation of sex, and the objectification of women's bodies take a key position in globalised gender imagery. "Sex sells" has been a basic theme in advertising imagery from the mid-20th century. Pictures of women's sexual characteristics are thought to promote the sale of any products, despite the fact that the sex in the picture has no relation to the use of the product for sale.

Exercise: Using sex to sell newspapers

Look at advertisements in your local newspapers and magazines. Do some of these adverts use sex to sell objects that are not directly related to sex? Do these images that "promote sex" commonly feature men or women? Do you think women or men are the likely to be the "audiences" of these advertisements? You can also give participants the selection of examples in **Handout twenty-four** that illustrates the way in which newspapers use the word and notions around sex to sell everything – from aeroplanes, to cell phones, to cars and even to a story about sex work.



Training tips: Notice how in the case of the aeroplane, the picture is a completely posed one. The model has nothing to do with the world championships for pilots of radio-controlled model jets. *The Voice* story uses the words "sex sells" to attract its readers to a story about the plight of poor women who are flocking across the border from Zimbabwe and becoming sex workers in Francistown, Botswana.

Does sex sell newspapers?

The traditional wisdom of newsrooms is that sex sells newspapers. Images of "page three babes" or "the back-page babe" (in Sunday papers) are supposed to attract readers. Images of scantily clothed women are used – often apparently at random – to "enhance" a page. It is interesting that this is hardly ever done with scantily dressed men.

Exercise: World cup study

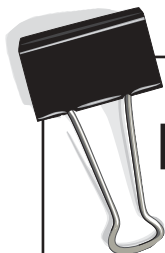
Using **Handout twenty-five**, contrast the way two newspapers used the same set of images: one with Ronaldo and woman inset; the other with Ronaldo and a broad spectrum of fans. Did this story need the inset of the woman to sell?



Training tip: This is a good example of "globalised" images. Both newspapers got their photos off the Internet. But the two papers chose to play the pictures quite differently. One could not resist the temptation of an inset of a woman in hot pants, enlarged on the inside page. The other newspaper simply featured Ronaldo's triumph. The inside page showed the many faces of those celebrating- women and men in all their diversity. It is hardly likely that on the day that Brazil won the world cup readers would need a woman in hot pants to entice them into buying the newspaper!

Sexuality and advertising

In 1992, the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media in Australia conducted research that found that: "Consumers object to the use of overt sexuality that has no relevance to the product being advertised. Advertisements that present the body, and therefore the person, as a simple sexual decoration and the object of sexual gratification or sexual ridicule is dehumanising. Because of the sensitivity of this issue, particular care should be taken in the portrayal of girls under 16 years old." The committee went on to recommend that: "It is important that sexuality in advertising is relevant, respects the dignity of individuals, and is non-exploitive."



handout twenty-five

Using sex to sell newspapers

SOMETHING TO PERK UP YOUR DAY



These two bosom buddies were all part of the fun in yesterday's National Cleavage Day, where a number of stunning beauties, their natural assets enhanced by Wonderbra, brought traffic to a standstill in many parts of Joburg.

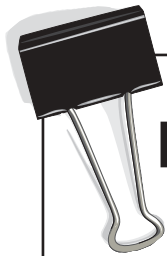
National Cleavage Day *Saturday Star*, 5 April 2003.



Winged contest... Zwartkops airbase near Pretoria will be the venue for the world championships for pilots of radio-controlled model jets from April 26 to May 4. Other attractions will include the opportunity for a member of the public to have a flip in a full-sized Harvard, seen behind model Magenta Smythe, from 7 to 9am every morning.



The Voice, 26 April 2002



handout twenty-six

World cup case study



The Citizen, 1 July 2002.



The Star, 1 July 2002.



The Citizen, 1 July 2002. (inside)



The Star, 1 July 2002. (inside)

Who are we selling to?

One interesting question is whether the dictum that “sex sells” only applies to male readers. Do the proponents think that female readers also rush to buy the newspaper in response to a sexy woman? One wonders whether the editors who regularly promote sexy women pictures have actually surveyed their readers (male and female) on this issue.

Exercise: Who is the target?

If time permits, class participants could try a “snap survey” of people outside the classroom to find out what kind of advertisements attract them and which turn them off. They could specifically use the two cell phone adverts in **Handout twenty-seven**. Are people more often attracted by advertisements for the sexy girl, or the older couple? Is this attraction equally valid for both men and women? Does anyone feel “turned off” by either of these adverts, and why? Are there any differences in the responses of women and men? Now read the articles in **Handout twenty-eight** on the effect of stereotyping and excluding women as a target for advertising.



Training tips: The two articles suggest that the male bias of advertising is not good for business. The cell phone advertisement is interesting in that while the first image clearly targets men only, the second image targets men and women, and it recognises older men and women, who are often invisible in the media. It gives a far more balanced view of society, and has a broader target market.

Advertising and stereotyping

In 1992, the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media in Australia conducted research that found that: “stereotyping in advertising does not tend to generate maximum consumer identification since, by definition, it entails a very superficial portrayal of characters... the role of women used in advertising would advisedly reflect the diversity of Australian women in a genuine and natural manner. This relates not only to particular roles but also to age, appearance and ethnic origin, according to varying target markets.”

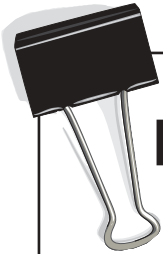
Selling to advertisers not readers?

One explanation of the “sex sells” attitude of editors is that it helps them sell the newspaper, not to readers, but to the advertisers who buy space in the paper. Advertisers frequently request the “kind” of page they want their advert to be on. This may be as simple as saying “on a woman’s page” or “on a sports page”. Often advertisers suggest the general slant they want on the stories around their advert: for instance advertisers may get quite upset to find their product illustrated by beautiful women appearing next to stories about rape and woman abuse.

Often, the editor, or sub-editor, has to make choices as to whether the advert or the news story and picture get cut. This is a form of unspoken censorship in the newsroom. These unspoken pressures are all part of the “photojournalist’s world” and add to the pressures of those who want to challenge gender stereotypes.

Sexist advertising can be challenged

When activists and members of the public complain about sexism and gender bias in advertising, many editors and publishers respond by saying they are merely meeting the demands of the market. However, most countries – including most Southern African countries – do have codes for published material that forbid openly damaging or harmful material. Increasingly, activists have found they can publicly campaign to get rid of offensive advertising under these codes. Further, commercial advertisers often are unwilling to confront public disapproval, and may remove offending images.



handout twenty-seven

Who buys cell phones?



It's the feeling you get when you do your banking at breakfast.

It's getting up with your coffee, your mouth full, the sun at the top of the ladder - it's getting up with your coffee, you see? Then your bank gives you a gift that's right in the middle of the morning and being able to do what you need to do in the middle of the morning is the best part of the day.



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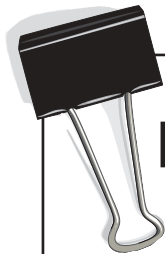
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Discuss: Who are the different targets in the two advertisements above. Who do you think the advert is more likely to appeal to? Why? Which advert is likely to attract more customers?



handout twenty-eight

Rethinking gender assumptions in advertising

Think again, think women

Trends have been obvious for years

BY STAFF REPORTER

If this is a man's world, then this is a man's country, right? And men make most of the important purchasing decisions, so that's where you should aim your advertising, right?

No and emphatically no, says one of the country's top media strategists.

Many South African businesses are missing huge opportunities by failing to exploit the secret of market dominance in a growing number of sectors - women, says Sue Walker, chairperson of the Advertising Media Association of SA and executive media director of leading advertising group TBWA HuntLascaris.

She says: "Women consumers are rampant in sector after sector; when a man's wallet starts to wilt, purse power goes on and on. My conclusion is that some marketing investment is misdirected. The money goes into male-dominated media, but women's interest media would often be a better bet."

Walker says the statistics are there, in the 2001A All Media Products Survey (AMPS) research, to back her assertion.

For instance, financial products and services are often thought to be dominated by the (male) head of the household. But, says Walker, this is becoming a His and Hers category where women have a bigger and bigger say.

AMPS figures show that in the home mortgages category, 25% of women have a mortgage in their name, while 55% of all joint mortgage holders are women.

Dirty fingernail

Other AMPS figures from show that even in "dirty-fingernail male preserves" like automotive tyres purchasing, women are responsible for 35% of sales.

In another "male" category - car-buying - 32% of new cars were bought by women last year. At least, they acted as the sole or main purchase decision-maker. In another 51% of cases, women claim to have influenced the joint decision to buy the vehicle.

In another "man's world", the purchasing of hand tool material 42% of purchase decisions are made by women.

Walker adds: "In a traditional woman's realm, grocery purchasing, female dominance remains

undisputed. Some 87% of household purchases are made by women.

"Yet in an area where you would expect male dominance - the purchase of their own clothes - you find nearly 30% of purchase decisions are made by women.

The trends have been obvious for years, but Walker believes many marketers follow long-established conventions when directing their spending.

It is not just a matter of media-spend. A "think women power" mindset by business would be reflected in a host of areas - staffing profiles, design of hardware store layouts, the ambience of tyre fitting centres, revised workshop design, new form and documentation design by financial institutions.

Walker notes: "Marketers who are first to plan for the power of women will secure a huge advantage over traditionalists who believe that men always decide. Gender stereotyping is bad business. It could be costing many businesses a huge number of sales".

WOMEN AND DIY: PAGE 17

Saturday Star, 23 February 2002

Go on advertisers, surprise us

Dad comes home tired. He saunters into the kitchen where Mum has been cooking a sumptuous dinner: the family tucks into a wholesome meal. We are all convinced that it must be that brand of cooking oil that is key to domestic bliss. The perfect family. The perfect myth?

What if Mum and Dad came home from work together? They both roll up their sleeves and cook dinner: Dad washes the dishes and Mum helps the kids with their homework. They both beam with satisfaction. Would we be shocked? Would we be any less convinced about that brand of cooking oil?

Has the advertising industry ever asked these questions?

One suspects not. Stereotypes tend to feed on stereotypes, creating a vicious circle of impoverished thinking. Close your eyes and think of some of the recent adverts you've seen or heard.

There's the stock Stork

Reconstruct, 1997



BY COLLEEN LOWE MORNA

in magazine ad of Mum cooking for the whole neighbourhood and loving herself for doing so. We are now all familiar with the Vodacom ad of the man who has left his nagging wife and is basking in the company of a young, bikini-clad woman as he listens to the monotonous voice-mail message from his wife: "Pack your bags and go." Not to forget Edgars' underwear "he'll beg me to take it off" and Telkom's call-mone time ad in which little girls learn the

craft of chatting on the phone. And there's Santam, whose insurance provisions are so generous that you can even insure your wife against driving your car - never mind the fact that far more men than women are involved in car accidents.

To quote a recent preliminary survey on gender and advertising by Chloe Hardy and Zohra Khan of the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE):

- Fewer men than women are portrayed in adverts;
- Women are portrayed as mothers, home-makers and sex objects;
- Elderly women never appear and disabled women are non-existent; and
- Men and women are portrayed as being at war with each other.

The commission has contracted a team of Durban-based researchers comprising the Centre of Gender Studies and Media and Communication Programme at the University of Natal and Vuleka Productions, a progressive media

and advertising company. They will monitor existing advertising and follow three case studies to determine what goes into making an advert and how the public responds.

When the CGE first held a gender and media symposium in 1997, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) said it had never received a complaint on sexist advertising and had no definition of a sexist advert. Since then, the ASA and the CGE have started to receive numerous such complaints. The two are now working together on proposing gender criteria for the ASA code of practice.

Research in Australia has shown just how wrong advertisers often are. For example, the research there showed that women, who make most decisions about which car to buy, are not turned on by nude models draped over the bonnet. Could it be that gender-sensitive advertising actually makes good economic sense?

Exercise: Discuss **Handout twenty-nine**. Have there been campaigns of this nature in your country against offensive advertising? What laws and regulations apply to advertising, and to publishing offensive material in general? “



Training tips: The Mauritian case study is a good example of assumptions being made about what is acceptable. Clearly many women objected. They used the power of the media to force the pace of change.

Using sex to sell safe sex?

Another phenomenon that has become apparent in recent times is the use of sexist stereotypes to sell advertisements on safe sex. Two examples of this are the controversial loveLife poster, “Everyone he has slept with, is sleeping with you” as well as the Population Services International (PSI) poster in Malawi on safe sex that uses a suggestive female pose and figure to “entice” men to use condoms.

Exercise: Does the end justify the means?

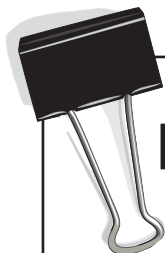
Use the two posters in **Handout thirty** to lead a discussion on using sexist images in order to promote safe sex. How has the public responded? What are the short and long-term implications?



Training tip: People Living with AIDS (PWAs) have complained that the loveLife poster is a graphic illustration of the racist and sexist stereotype that black men are interested in lots of sex, with anyone; that women accept and want this and that people with HIV get the virus because they act out this stereotype. The Malawi example is an interesting case study in balancing short-term gains against the long-term need for fundamental change in attitudes and behaviour.

In sum, major decisions on gender often conform to the advertiser’s view of gender rather than the event being reported, the intention of the photographer taking the picture, or the sub-editor’s preconceptions.

The problem, of course, is that complaints about the gender impact of advertising need to be addressed to the advertisers - not solely to the newspaper itself. Consumers and readers need to take up issues around offensive advertising with regulatory authorities. But the first step in this process may be for readers to alert the publication that carries an offensive advert that the advert is indeed an issue that will not simply go away. The Mauritius case study in the previous handout shows that public pressure can make a difference.



handout twenty-nine

Advert banned in Mauritius

By Loga Virahsawmy*

In June 2003 Media Watch (Mauritius) successfully challenged a concrete advertisement that showed the legs of a woman dangling in front of pillars with the suggestion that while concrete is “for real” women are not. The TV version of the advertisement showed a silhouette of a woman stripping in front of a building block.

An alert put out by the organisation received wide media coverage. *La Vie Catholique*, a weekly newspaper, added a footnote to the alert: “We cannot agree more with this stand. The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) should not only see to it that the person behind this publicity (be it a man or a woman) should ask himself/herself lots of questions. But

for now this advertisement should have the following slogan to be more coherent with the image projected: *UBP, a helping hand to encourage sexism and rape.*”



A weekly changed the title to “Ban this advertisement”. A student from a five star college telephoned to ask if nothing else could be done apart from banning the advertisement. A teacher from the same college telephoned a few days later to express gratitude on behalf of students and teachers on Media Watch’s stand and said that the negative effects of this kind of advertisement were highlighted during a social studies class.

The Ministry of Women Rights, Child Protection and Family Welfare also reported receiving many complaints from women who did not know how or where to air their views.

The company withdrew the advertisement long before the public hearing called by the IBA on 11 July that served to formalise the withdrawal. The IBA reassured Media Watch that a Code of Ethics on advertisement is being finalised.

Media Watch seized the opportunity of the hearing to display vivid examples of advertisements using women as objects and explained the harm these advertisements can cause to a society where gender violence and rape are on the rise.

(*Loga Virahsawmy is President of Media Watch Organisation, Mauritius.)



handout thirty

Using sex to sell safe sex?

In late 2002, members of South Africa's National Association of People living with HIV and AIDS (NAPWA) complained bitterly that billboards produced by loveLife were seriously offensive, on grounds of race and gender. People actually defaced billboards around Johannesburg to make this point. However, when the press carried stories reporting this incident, loveLife management threatened to charge people who defaced billboards with damage to property; and, responding to the loveLife management, newspaper editorials condemned the protesters (on the grounds that "we all have to work together against HIV and AIDS"). Many of these same newspapers have carried the same poster images in paid advertising from loveLife.

Discuss: Do you think this advertisement (carried both in newspaper inserts and as a billboard) is offensive on grounds of race or gender? What does it say about the male in the picture? What does it say about the women? What does it suggest about people living with HIV?

The poster opposite was developed by FSI Malawi following considerable field tests that suggested that condoms had to be made "sexy" if men were to use them. FSI recognised the stereotypes that appealing to male sexuality involved, but argued that such a short term approach was necessary in light of the urgent need to get men to use condoms. Debate this issue in your groups.

