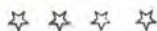


“Women in Advertisement” Pennie Azarcon

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In a **Mediawatch** project sponsored by the Pacific Asia Women’s Forum and Pilipina, this writer and some Maryknoll students monitored the top dailies, magazines, “comics,” radio shows and TV programs and selected films to find out the image of women as reflected in these media. Print advertisements and radio/TV commercials were likewise monitored from July to November 1985.

The results may be predictable, but nonetheless provocative.



Catching a man is a cinch. All it takes is the right deodorant, a strong gargle, and soft lustrous hair. A smooth creamy complexion also helps. If you want him for keeps, throw in some whiter wash, a perfectly turned fillet, and a well-buffed floor. A super cockroach spray also works wonders.

Take it from the ads and commercials we watch and see all the time; they make happy endings seem just a shampoo away.

Reality, alas, is more complicated. It would certainly take more time than just another brand of toilet paper to drive women into ecstasy or a pile of clean shirts to move them into song. One suspects that on the contrary, most women would be moved into uncontrollable rage once they realize the unmitigated guilts and cavernous insecurities foisted on them by the same ads all these years.

RADIO ADS

Ads often aim at woman’s most vulnerable features which are easiest to exploit.

Who can resist the prospect of eternal youth, beauty and desirability straight out of a jar of cream?

By defining womanhood as based solely on sex appeal, cosmetic ads can drive plain Janes into scaling the walls or perhaps hiding their heads in shame and desperation. The ordinary housewife or mother is just as persecuted. Who can ever hope to compete with the gourmet meals prepared from instant mixes, the sink scrubbed into gleaming white in a snap.

The woman who fails to measure up might as well flog herself in guilt for flunking her one true vocation in life: mastering home and hearth. For isn’t that what the ads on food, household products and kitchen aids tell us when they repeatedly portray women in her kitchen cooking, in the bathroom scrubbing, or in the table serving? And don’t forget to smile, ladies!

The expectations are particularly unfair to working or career women who are suspiciously absent or conveniently ignored in most radio ads monitored for the project. Instead, women as mothers abound in 57% of the ads, followed closely by the wife in 21 percent of the ads, and the woman as domestic or househelp in 16%.

Between the vain creature endlessly buffing her nails or giggling to show off her pearly whites and the neurotic laundry woman singing praises to her spotless wash, the ordinary woman working for her keep out of grim necessity and the harried housewife battling boredom, fatigue and budget constraints sound like a pathetic and alien character. Whatever happened to the real woman like you and me?

Because it’s bad enough that there are limited roles given to women in the ads; what’s worse is that there are prescribed qualities attached to each role, as a study of the ad characters’ perceived desirable traits reveals.

The mother should always be concerned and preoccupied with the pursuit of the right brand of vitamins, breakfast cereals, coffee and margarine for her family. As homemaker, she must be budget-conscious, choosing cough syrup, detergents and toilet soaps based on weight grams, time elapsed before dissolving and number of bed-sheets washed per laundry bar. Being up to date with the latest products in the market is likewise a must, as the ads stress. “You should be modern.”

Alright, but what's wrong with all these qualities that every doting mom look for in their prospective daughters-in-law?

Why burden the already overworked housewife with the entire responsibility of keeping the home fires burning and looking after her family's welfare and health? With the economic crunch, more and more women are joining the labor force, often finding themselves pinching in their toes to fit into the shoes of Superwoman. After punching in an eight-hour day at the office, she rushes home to her next work shift, preparing dinner, washing up and looking after the kids while the husband relaxes nearby, watching television. For most working wives schooled in traditional ideas, the option of shared housework is just about as improbable as a radio ad on baby food using a male model as caregiver. Sexist ads reinforce this unfair arrangement and doom a lot of women to the rigors of a double day.

Admittedly, some women do enjoy the comforting predictability of house chores. But to turn exceptions into the rule as manifested by radio ads is to deny that the lowest pay scale in the country today goes to househelps — whose main qualification is their close affinity to domestic chores. If housewifery is so noble and fulfilling as the ads say, how come it merits no recognition as legitimate work — either in the paycheck or even in the labor statistics where hardly any mention is made of the back-breaking yet invisible tasks, the all-around skills needed, and the no-day-off clause?

Or is the glorification in radio ads the psychic reward itself, the 60-second tribute to the tired wife's unpaid 60-hour work week? The tribute, sad to say, is just about as empty as those hours in the future when the same mother/wife discovers that she has about 20 more years to look forward to — and nothing else. With kids all married and settled down, and husband either dead or retired and certainly not enough distraction for a 24-hour day, what is the fulltime housewife who has poured all her energy, creative thoughts and feelings into home chores and mothering left to do? The radio ads glorifying all those gleaming kitchen appliances that barricade women more firmly and subtly in her busy world of pots and pans are not about to tell us?

Another critical issue in radio ads is how males seem to have the last say in consumer choices made by women. About 80 percent of product advertisements have male voice-overs, for anything from milk, toothpaste, and soap.

Why should women listen to this absolute "voice of authority" as voice-overs are termed in advertising jargon? Because as some experts (probably male) ex-

pound, the act of buying is menial, hence a woman's job; whereas the act of deciding the better buy based on ingredients, formulation, etc. is scientific and technical, therefore a man's job. Now you know where all those stereotypical assumptions begin.

Some of the more offensive we've heard: a medicated plaster commercial with a little girl wailing. "It is very painful, Doctor." Before one can even rejoice at finding a female doctor at last in the thicket of secondary roles given her, the next line chokes out the smile: the little girl confesses that she got her nasty cut while dicing vegetables. Already, the lines have been drawn at such an early age: little girls, like their mom, belong in the kitchen. Another version of the same ad has a little boy bruised after a game of basketball.

The stereotypes extend to the mellifluous, high-pitched and flirty voices used by women in commercials for soap, shampoo and toothpaste. One immediately and automatically conjures up images of bubble-headed females giggling their afternoons away while discussing boyfriends and crushes.

Based on the roles and characterizations given women in radio ads, women are either vamps or virgins. The vamps or sex objects tease and flirt their way to a man's heart in cosmetic or toiletry ads using variations of a soap message. "Touch me." The virgins or madonnas are the chaste mothers and wives whose only excess, it would seem, is their overwhelming concern for their families.

TELEVISION ADS

Television ads are no less insidious. With the screen flashing so many images per second there is the added advantage of visual recall. Television ads' use of the medium has in fact been cited by Glenn Doman in his book, *Teach Your Baby To Read* as effective teaching techniques: the audible repetition, the bold distinctive letters against a clear background, the short brisk sessions not lasting more than two minutes at a time, the product logo flashed for a final wrap-up.

Unfortunately, the medium's attraction to kids has made them the most vulnerable victims to the distorted images reflected by television ads.

A story is told of a three-year old girl who refused to touch her chocolate milk drink. No amount of coaxing, wheeling and threatening from her mother could persuade her to drink even a drop of the concoction. Persistent questioning however brought out the main reason for her repugnance: "Because according to the TV, that is only for boys."

The three-year old was obviously more observant than most of us. Indeed a close monitoring of advertisements reveal some disturbing images of women filtered through our living rooms. Some of these are:

1) Women in TV ads play significantly more roles inside the domestic unit than men. Their most dominant role, however, is being a mother, followed by the wife, the homemaker or the laundry woman, the daughter seeking advice or receiving attention, and the bride.

In contrast, male roles are limited to being father, husband, son, or a sick man. There are less ads using men in the home setting as if this area is exclusively women's domain. It has likewise been observed that even as husbands and fathers, the male's roles have something to do with giving approval to the wife's choice of product brand, or enjoying her ministrations where they are shown being served dinner by their solicitous wives.

2) Outside the home, male characters enjoy more roles — from executives to doctors to rodeo men. Women, surprisingly, enjoy just as many varied roles outside the domestic setting (25 in all, equal to the male's), but the most dominant, judging from the most number of ads using the role, remains that of a giggly teener, date, student or part of a group having a good time.

The next most dominant roles for women outside the home would be that of anonymous employees, usually indicated by a typewriter before them, their boarding an elevator with coat-and-tie attired men, or their being dressed up in the regulation blazer suit. That the ads using female characters in these roles are mainly confined to toiletries and cosmetics probably say more about tokenism from ad agencies than any treatise on the subject. Again, a contemporary image has been expropriated, but the needs portrayed and means to attain them, remain traditional and sexist.

3) The concept of male reward or male approval is alive and well and sickening. The most guilty culprit are toiletries and cosmetic ads, as if to sell the idea that the end-all be-all of a woman's ablutions is the attentive male. It's not comforting to note that even when using the successful woman image, the prized catch remains a man. It's alright to go out and conquer the world, the ads seem to say, as long as one defers to a man at the end of a regular office day. It is disgusting that the so-called accomplished women portrayed by the ads would have to rely on their boyfriend's or husband say-so to validate their most routine purchases.

Again, the use of such techniques to sell products also foster unhealthy competition and jealousy among

women who all aspire, it seems, for that elusive male glance. His approval seems to make all those pains to get a whiter wash over another woman's laundry worth it. For the unfortunate lady with the dandruff however, the man turns unchivalrous and openly throws snide remarks about her. Why anybody (especially an otherwise pretty or unsuccessful woman) would bother to get into such guy's good graces is beyond us. Only the male copywriters of such demeaning ads can make the logic stick.

4) Among the most desirable qualities being foisted on women by ads are: being budget-conscious, economical and smart regarding household chores and implements, having good looks, a pleasant smell, whiter teeth, soft hands, flawless skin, shiny hair, dependability as a mother, love and concern as a wife and docility to husband. For men, the ads stress the need to have discriminating tastes to be able to savor the good things in life to be game and sportsmanlike, and enjoy night-outs with the boys.

5) As in radio ads, majority of the ads are voiced over by males, 97 percent or 92 out of 96 ads. Only four products have female voice-overs. Would a woman endorsing athletic supporters be as credible?

6) The most frequently-aired ads are those of personal products (toiletries and cosmetics), and food and beverages. Again, the subtle message is that women have to be beautiful and desirable at all times, and must also be nurturing and concerned about family needs. It doesn't help any that most female characters used in the ads are pretty.

Beauty, docility and super household efficiency: what a tough act to follow!

MAGAZINE ADS

Close scrutiny of print ads in several magazines reveals that certain myths and unchallenged notions are being perpetuated against women.

By sheer number of exposure, ads for food, beauty aids and medicines easily identify women as mainly mothers, wives, homemakers, and keepers of the family's health and well-being, at the same time, sex objects who must please lovers and husbands with eternal youth, good looks and impeccable grooming.

The endless ads for cosmetics, food and kitchen aids can make women feel insecure and unfeminine if they're not pretty or shapely enough, and guilty if their toilets aren't as sparkling as the next woman's. The mother's

image as know-it-all even in medical problems can easily make every cough and cold a personal affront to her capability to fill in that role.

Some of the more common notions reinforced by magazine ads are:

1) A woman's ultimate worth is gauged by her ability to attract and catch a man. This is obvious in all those ads where the woman's judicious choice of eye shadow, softdrink or deodorant lands her a man.

2) A woman's place is in the home, taking care of her family, serving her husband and dressing the wounds of little boys. Print ads feature women standing beside refrigerators, cradling infants, being asked to tie her kids' shoelaces for toddlers, holding a clean rag and buffing a table.

3) Women are a part of a man's conquest and enhance their manhood. They are there for the gratification of men. This is most evident in ads for tight-fitting jeanswear where women's buttocks in these second-skin jeans are provocatively posed.

4) Boys will be boys, the shapers of the world's future, the progenitor of the world's races, so he needs more care and better food than little girls. The question needs repeating: why is it that most ads for food, tonic drinks and medicine feature the mother feeding the male child? Are female children not entitled to as much care?

5) Women have to be soft, beautiful and loving. The dumb blonde is one interpretation that comes to mind, and indeed in cosmetic, ads, women do nothing else but flutter mascara'ed lashes. Particularly atrocious is that ad for a department store where the copy reads in part: "Little girls in ruffles and frills. Little boys in stripes and checks". Starting girls young in this vain pursuit of femininity is hardly heartening for mothers who'd like their daughters to develop something else beyond good looks.

The use of pretty models all the time also impose impossible standards of youth, beauty and figure on women who dissipate their energy trying to measure up.

6) Success, leisure and the good life are male prerogatives. Even in their underwear, men are shown in opulent surroundings or doing active and interesting pursuits like a game of tennis.

In the same vein, when ads show women endorsing the products, they're usually housewives or celebrities who also happen to be pretty and wholesome in her screen roles. When males endorse products, they're

usually billed as experts in the field: a dentist, a doctor, an expert in something.

7) Women are silly, stupid, dumb or superstitious, prone to old wives' tales and other traditional beliefs that go against scientific claims and discoveries.

Television ads indeed give new meaning to a constitutional aggruppation known as "women, children and idiots."

Some media observers note that ads do not create the realities; they only reflect them. And yet, by presenting only the more extreme stereotypes, they exacerbate the already negative feelings some women have about themselves, thanks to our male-centered society. Further exaggerations only add to the guilt, confusion and shame these women might be trying to overcome. Also, by institutionalizing one-dimensional images of women through the media, ads make it harder for women to break out of the sexist molds that cage them. In fact, women models in advertisements may not be aware of it, but they themselves are the seller and the sold. By pitching in for a particular product that exploit mainly their being pretty and attractive docile, women may be selling their own goods and services that in turn perpetuate an image or lifestyle that is oppressive to other women. Another possibility is that she could be selling a culture which, in its glossy perfection, could be unattainable and thus, frustrating to this already disadvantaged sector. Again, pitting women against her sisters has been effectively used by the system.

Our only comfort at this point is the hope that all these insults, all the horrid stereotypes thrown our way and the useless products that worm their way into our needs would build up enough rage in us to make us take up matters into our hands — finally and irrevocably. No longer the meek, pretty and male-craving female, we would use this tool of oppression to liberate ourselves and to create our own image, at last!