

The Image of Women in Television Commercials and Drama: Media as Creator or Mirror of reality

The question of mass media as creator versus mirror of culture is one of the most debated issues in the relationship between mass media and society. Some critical media sociologists emphasize the value-producing function of mass media, whereas others are foremost interested in demonstrating how social reality is reflected in the media.⁽¹⁾

TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

While IWSAW was reviewing the production of a commercial promoting reading for children with an art director, we were instructed to use a man's voice for the slogan. Why? Because his is the voice of authority. It is more effective! Is this technique a reflection of social reality or is it a 'value-producing' technique?

The scopes covered by the different forms of the media are numerous and each projects itself and utilizes images to serve its own goals. For instance, television commercials project desired images with the sole purpose of creating brand awareness and affecting consumption patterns. It would seem, to a simple observer, that commercials attempt to produce new values in a setting which reflects reality or at least partial reality, in order to arouse desired images and motivate consumption. In short, the entire package represents a desirable, even exaggerated life style within the general context of the societal framework. For instance, generally speaking and cutting across cultural lines, women

are the major consumer group of domestic products ranging from detergent to food products, cosmetics, and therefore women appear more in the relevant commercials. Children are the target group for sweets, toys, music items, soda, and fad items, and consequently, women appear as the wise, friendly and loving mothers in these commercials. Men, on the other hand, are the target for corporate products, alcoholic beverages, travel items, etc.... The appearance of women in these commercials tends to rotate around being portrayed as a sex object, the prized and proud companion of the man, or a loving and conscientious wife, with physical beauty as the common denominator. The methods used for marketing the products coincide and reinforce traditional role-definitions of sex and age in society, because the products themselves fall into the traditional division of labor. To make it more attractive, the presentation of this reality tends to thrive on values such as independence, upper socio-economic status, and success, portrayed by fantasies of sophistication, beauty, and fancy gadgets.

Yet in most cases the fantasies and images are exaggerated and do not coincide with practical and social reality. For instance, a local commercial of a corn oil, shows a woman preparing french fries for her husband who is fully dressed and ready to go out to dinner. She is also dressed in her evening dress, full hair and make-up, as if going out to

dinner. In fact her hand reaching out to taste the crispy fries seems to have just emerged from the room of a manicurist. The commercial ends with them cheerfully and romantically walking away in each others arms leaving behind them a full platter of crispy french fries.

Hence, the commercial contains, a happy, young couple, a spotless kitchen, sophisticated and fashionable appearances, no sign of children, therefore, newly weds. By the way, the talk-over voice is that of a man!

Commercials of men's products never fail to show a beautiful young woman, even if only for a glance, as a component of the successful man's life. For sales purposes, these images seem to be effective, or else they would not persist despite the objections and lobbying of feminists.

TELEVISION DRAMA

Another interesting study that landed on my desk was "The Image of Women in Drama and Women's Programs in Egyptian Television", a regional paper by Dr. Soha Abdel Kader for the population Council. Dr. Abdel Kader's study goes into an in-depth and elaborate analysis of the components of drama, broadcasting time given to women's programs, the content of women's programs, Egyptian television public policies and additional sociological research making the study comprehensive. However, we have restricted our reference to part



of the results in the scope of this article.

Although the study dates back to 1985, the results of the analysis concerning female characters in drama revealed interesting results.

Thus, Abdel Kader's measure of women's image in Egyptian television drama is based on comparing it to men along a number of parameters, including total representation, socioeconomic status and personality traits portrayed on the screen.

1. By representation, Abdel Kader means the degree of visibility: There is flagrant under-representation of women in terms of the numbers and percentages of dramatic characters, and very limited screen visibility as compared to men. This under-representation may not be intentional, she notes, but may simply serve to emphasize the marginality of women in society.

2. The analysis of socio-economic status of female drama characters compared to male drama characters shows a traditional attitude towards women. "In terms of age and marital status: female characters are depicted as young, usually in their twenties, physically attractive, overdressed and over made-up, they are identified mainly by their affiliation to the men in their lives. Whereas male characters are in their thirties, identified by their professional or occupational status, and only secondarily with their relationship to women."⁽²⁾ Working

women are usually single, and tend to concentrate in traditional fields like secretaries and the like. According to Abdel Kader, these characteristics reflect the traditional sexual division of labor and sex-role in Egyptian society.

3. The analysis of personality traits of female and male dramatic characters reveal evident stereotyping. "As wives, they are the stabilizing force; as daughters, they are more obedient, more loving, and more supportive of their families than sons; as women in love, they are serious, dedicated, considering marriage the only legitimate and justifiable aim of romantic involvements."⁽³⁾ This depiction of women as the upholders of morality in society is in many ways traditional, concludes Abdel Kader.

In conclusion and in agreement with Abdel Kader and other research conducted on the topic of women and mass media, reinforcement of traditional stereotypes for women is persistent. These stereotypes cannot be classified as value-producing techniques but fall more into the mirror of culture role of the media. Hence, the media cannot completely deviate from reality, it can only use itself as a form of art to modify reality and project fantasy. But what is the source of fantasy if not reality itself?

These generalizations remain totally unscientific, because one would have to study each form of the media in order to put reality, fantasy, images, traditions and art into their proper

perspectives. One could tentatively generalize, however, that the image of women in television commercials and drama, in most parts of the world, is far from emphasizing equality between the sexes. Further research is necessarily to understand the image of Arab women in the media and to point out that regional and local media do not challenge traditional values and traditional role-definitions in such a way to produce new values and stimulate change •

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(1) Soha Abdel Kader, "The Image of Women in Drama and women's Programs in Egyptian Television", Regional Paper for **The Population Council**, West Asia and North Africa, Cairo, February 1985.

(2) Abdel Kader. pg.60.

(3) Ibid. pg. 61.

Additional source: Matilda Butler and William Paisley, **Women and the Mass Media: Sourcebook for Research and Action.**New York Human Science Press. 1980