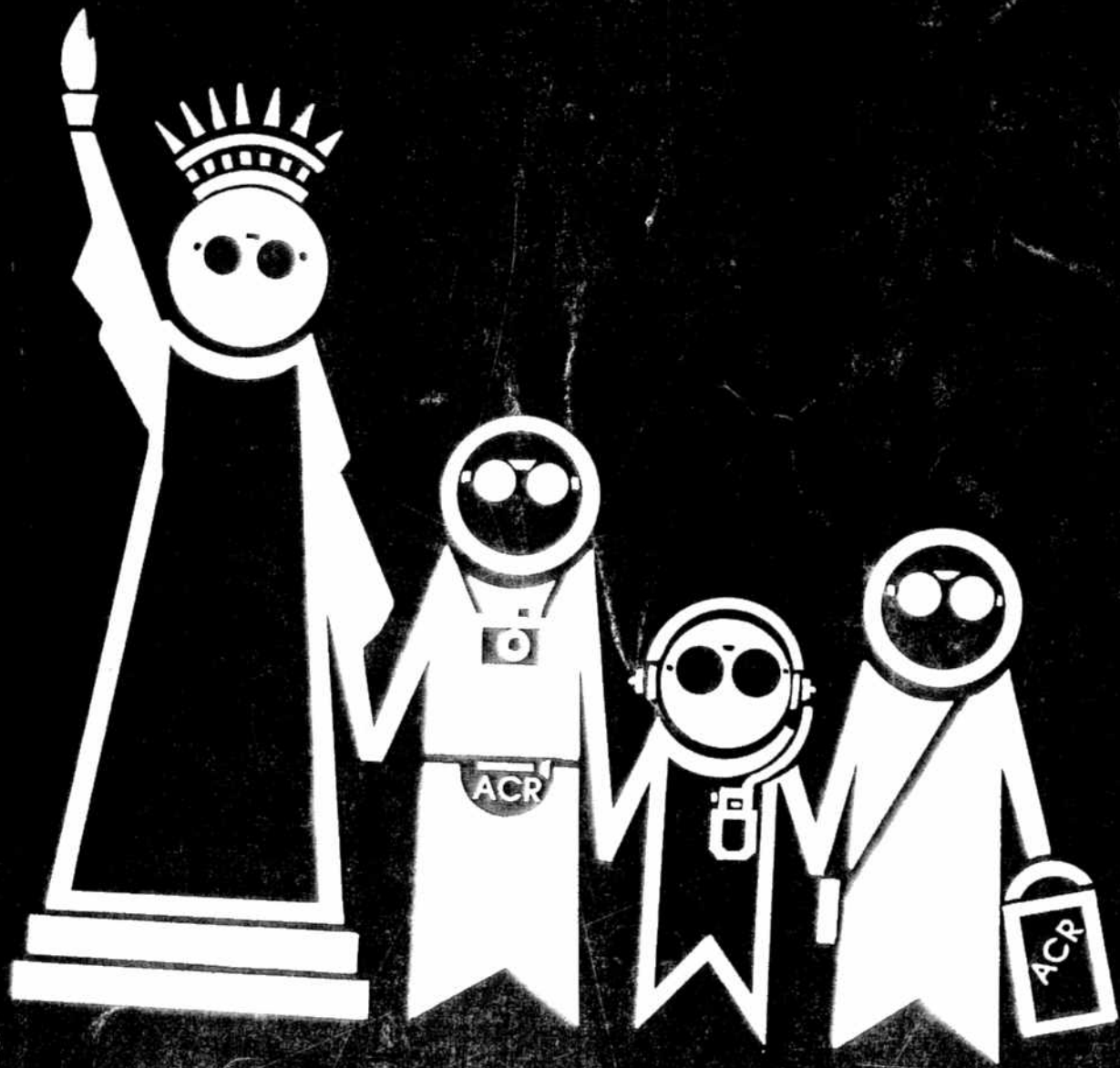


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Rebecca H. Holman  
Michael R. Solomon, Editors

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# Gender Representation in Advertising

Nancy Artz, University of Southern Maine  
Alladi Venkatesh, University of California, Irvine

## OBJECTIVE OF THE SESSION

The objective of this session is to discuss how practitioners and academics have approached the study of gender representation in advertising and to consider alternative ways to advance future research in this area. The session is designed to bring together practitioners and academics who share a common interest in the topic but whose perspectives (both between and within these two groups) may be different. For example, some focus on gender as an operational aspect of advertising, some are more concerned with the theoretical construction of gender, and others are interested in media images of sex-role stereotypes. By bringing together different perspectives, we hope to sensitize consumer researchers to the full range of possibilities in gender research in advertising and encourage fruitful discussions on the representations of men and women in advertisements.

## BACKGROUND

The history of the modern "Women's movement" is short but dramatic. The movement is widely acknowledged to be one of the most important social developments in the second half of the twentieth century. In recognition of the significance of the movement, the year 1975 was declared "International Women's Year". This social and intellectual movement, which began in the 1960's, is still evolving and giving rise to new vocabulary and discourse. The term "gender" itself, which has undergone much intellectual scrutiny in the recent years, does not even appear in the now famous 1964 issue of *Daedalus* examining "The Women of America". The term "women's movement" has become anachronistic and is slowly being replaced by other terminology. As expected with an important social movement, its basic ideas have cast their long shadow on the theory and practice of marketing and advertising. It is to this topic that we shall return in this paper.

Studies on gender and advertising are of a recent origin (dating back to the early seventies) and cut across a variety of disciplines including mass communications (Busby 1975), sociology (Goffman 1976), critical theory/social criticism (Williamson 1978), feminist theory (Barthel 1988), marketing/consumer research (Courtney and Lockeretz 1971, Courtney and Whipple 1983, Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976, Lundstrom and Siglimplaglia 1977, Venkatesan and Losco 1975, Wagner and Banos 1973) and international marketing (Gilly 1988, Lysonski 1985). In the field of marketing/consumer research (represented by the authors of this paper), a recent book by Courtney and Whipple (1983) provides a comprehensive summary of the discussion and debates on this topic. In addition to the academic publications just cited, there have been some important contributions from

practicing marketing professionals. Of these, the work by Bartos (1982) is particularly noteworthy.

If we go beyond advertising to broader issues concerning gender and marketing, there is a much larger body of work from the seventies. A special issue of the *Journal of Marketing* (July 1977) was devoted to the changing roles of women and their implications for marketing theory and practice. This was followed by Venkatesh's (1985) work based on his dissertation. Some of the many marketing scholars who have worked in this area include Roberts, Wortzel, Gentry, Iyer, Debevec, Strober, Douglas, McCall.

After an initial burst of research activity in the seventies and early eighties, there has been a general deceleration of published research in this area. Does it mean there are no more new questions, or that the old questions have all been answered adequately? We would have to respond 'no' to both. In our opinion, the questions have become more complex, the issues are much more nuanced, and there is scope for both exciting and sustained scholarship. In a modest way, we explore these issues in this session.

## AN ANALYSIS OF PAST APPROACHES

In considering the past approaches to the study of gender in marketing, or more specifically, gender in advertising, we begin by highlighting positive contributions and then provide a critique and suggestions for future research.

The positive contributions of researchers within the marketing/consumer behavior discipline can be summarized as follows: the discipline has responded to the shifts in gender-based roles by readjusting its intellectual focus, by developing analytical strategies, and by fostering sensitivity to the causes and consequences of momentous changes in the social arena. Marketing practice has similarly undergone some fundamental shifts in response to the actual and potential impact of sex-role changes on consumption patterns. The profession as a whole has come to the realization that these changes are not limited to a particular situation or context, but have had a lasting impact on consumers in their capacity as individuals and as members of households, work groups, and other institutional settings. Consumer behavior text books have legitimated the subject by devoting entire chapters to this topic.

It is ironic that the academic research effort on this topic has slowed now that the topic is accepted as legitimate. This decline in attention, however, is not reflected in marketing practice or in the general media attention to women's issues. One has only to visit a neighborhood book store to find numerous books and magazines devoted to gender and its many forms. We find it significant that there is a lack of attention to this topic among

marketing scholars given the simultaneous explosion of media attention. We now examine these and other related issues by way of a critique.

#### **Single Issue Research**

One criticism of the past approaches to the study of gender issues in marketing and advertising is that there has been a preoccupation with a single theme, sexual-stereotyping. (There are some interesting exceptions - see for example, Alreck, Settle and Belch 1982, Gentry, Doering, and O'Brien 1978). The number of articles on this single issue is staggering. We feel that the endless repetition of content-analyses on this narrow theme has finally produced a state of analytical exhaustion. The problem is that the content analyses are limited to frequency counts of role portrayals that yield rather superficial and somewhat self-evident inferences (see Ferguson, Kreshel and Tinkham 1990 for an attempt to expand the approach). The result of this narrow focus on content analyses of role portrayals has trivialized the fundamental issue of gender representation by ignoring other richer dimensions.

A related criticism involves the discipline's preoccupation with the representation of women and subsequent lack of focus on the representation of men. This exclusion of male representation is an obvious illustration of how gender is more comprehensive than its construction in this research stream. A final criticism is that the research has tended to describe sex-role portrayal but has not fully examined the persuasive implications of gender representation.

#### **Limited Perspectives of Advertising Practice**

The advertising industry, like the academic community, has also had a narrow perspective. Rather than view the women's movement as an opportunity to reconceptualize marketing practice, the advertising industry has had a single response to changing sex-roles. That response has been to de-emphasize traditional role portrayals and emphasize role portrayals that conform to modernistic/egalitarian norms. Some critics charge that the industry's response is self-serving and demonstrates that the industry has misunderstood the true nature of the women's movement. In this view, superficial changes in role portrayals are simply a way of exploiting or taking advantage of the women's movement rather than a way of promoting emancipation. In all, the marketing approach has been unimaginative and driven by narrow concerns of the bottom line.

#### **A Lack of Theory**

Because the marketing literature was produced in response to a contemporary social movement, there was not sufficient time or attention paid to theoretical issues. Such a theoretical vacuum is not uncommon to problems of this sort, and some parallels can be found in other instances - consumer movement, oil crisis, ghetto marketing, etc. In all these cases, marketing studies were generated within the specific context of a movement without any

conceptual or theoretical foundations to guide a sustained discourse.

#### **Inadequate Distinction Between Sex, Gender and Sexuality**

Past study of gender representation can be termed simplistic for not examining the rich multidimensionality of related concepts. "Gender" needs to be understood as a culturally constructed category which goes beyond but encompasses the biological category of sex, the social-psychological category of sex role, the psychological category of masculine/feminine identity, and the psycho-behavioral category of sexuality. In the marketing literature there has been a tendency to confuse these categories and a failure to appreciate their theoretical underpinnings.

#### **A Lack of Critical Approach and A Lost Opportunity**

The academic work in marketing has typically and rather uncritically sided with the practitioner perspective subscribing to the view that the "women's movement" offers one more opportunity to effectively create a marketing niche for various products and services. There is thus a lost opportunity to meaningfully address a rich array of issues concerning aesthetics, politics of advertising, symbolic aspects of gender representation, production and reproduction of cultural imagery, and the like.

The above represent some of the more important reasons why fruitful research in "gender and advertising" has stagnated. We would now like to offer a few suggestions for reviving and advancing research interest in this area.

### **HOW CAN GENDER RESEARCH BE ENRICHED?**

Gender research should move beyond the sex-role stereotyping framework. We do not recommend that the sex-role framework be completely abandoned. We see some possible extensions here. For example, the intersection of gender and other demographic characteristics is relatively unexplored in the marketing literature. How do sex-role issues pertain to children, teenagers, and ethnic minorities? Marketing scholars and practitioners might want to examine Goffman (1976) for a brilliant analysis of roles and ritual practices.

Alternative frameworks to the study of gender in advertising can be developed by systematically examining the theoretical ideas enunciated in different disciplines. Disciplines that can provide valuable foundations for future gender studies in marketing include the fields of literary theory, intellectual history, philosophy, phenomenology, linguistics, and cultural studies. (We refer to Venkatesh's paper in this session for a representative account of the ideas from these disciplines.)

Gender research must be grounded in both theory and practice. In terms of theory, gender must be evaluated not only in terms of sex-roles (a loosely constructed social-psychological concept

that describes sexual division of labor), but in terms of psycho-social and psycho-analytical terms. Concepts such as identity, subjectivity, sexuality can describe gender from a multi-dimensional perspective. (The session on sexuality at this conference chaired by Gould is an interesting start in this direction). Research should address both intra-gender and inter-gender dynamics. Consideration should be given to underlying social-structural issues, power relationships between gender categories, and mythological and metaphorical issues as well.

The study of gender representation in advertising must be grounded in theories of representation applied to other cultural settings like literature, art, film, etc. Gender representation must be studied not only psychologically (e.g., subjectivity, identity) but anthropologically (relationships to the human environment). Gender can also be studied semiotically as a signification process (We refer to Artz's paper on this panel). While psychological approaches deal with internal representations of the "being", semiotic processes deal with symbolic configurations and the communication of meaning.

In terms of grounding the research in practice we propose the following. We should continue to study the persuasive implication of gender dimensions in advertising (We refer to the Bartos and McManamon and Whipple papers in this session) and begin to study advertising practice, itself, as it relates to gender. Specifically, we should consider the underlying production processes in advertising and institutional practices that lead to particular constructions of gender and gender representations. Thus one can study where the ideas for gender representation come from, who the cultural and corporate elites are, and what the social apparatuses are that determine how and what gender-based advertising should be. To gain a further understanding of the prevailing cultural norms and the practices, advertising professionals must be interviewed along with models and characters who figure in advertising copy or commercials. We believe advertising should be studied in naturalistic settings. That is, advertising practices must be systematically deconstructed by a comprehensive analysis of the commercials, the people, and the media.

The above are but a few suggestions to expand the scope and enhance the quality of research on gender in advertising. We shall now turn our attention to the papers in this special topic session.

#### INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SESSION PAPERS

The session represents a new consciousness in gender research and opens the door to future possibilities for research. The papers represent a first glimpse at some new directions. We hope that our comments above and the ideas expressed by the paper presenters will help consumer researchers initiate new studies and find fresh sources of ideas for their research.

*Paper 1 by Rena Bartos:* This paper presents the perspective of a practitioner who has been a pioneer in the analysis of gender in advertising. Her approach to the study of gender is analytical and based on years of experience in the field. She argues that sex-role stereotypes have had a limiting effect on marketing strategy and she urges practitioners to assess consumers' attitudinal response to gender imagery as part of their standard copy testing procedure.

*Paper 2 by Mary K. McManamon and Thomas W. Whipple:* This paper uses an experimental approach to study the persuasive effect of gender in advertising. Four gender-related variables in advertising are examined: the sex of the spokesperson, the sex of the announcer, the gender of the product, and the sex of the target audience. As is typical of experimental research, gender is viewed in a relatively simple categorical sense. The focus is less on the complexities of gender as a construct and more on how gender as an operational variable influences consumer response to advertising.

*Paper 3 by Nancy Artz:* This paper examines the portrayal of women in advertising. An attempt is made to describe gender portrayal in rich, contextual terms rather than narrowly focus on sex-role stereotypes using simplistic terms (e.g., traditional versus non-traditional occupations). Semiotic analysis is used to show how subtle executional elements influence gender portrayal and the viewer's evaluation of that portrayal.

*Paper 4 by Alladi Venkatesh:* This conceptual paper reviews feminist theory to provide a deeper understanding of gender as a construct. The goal is to show that gender can be viewed in ways other than as simple sex-role stereotypes or as a simple classification of consumers and products as masculine or feminine. The paper argues for a sophisticated construction of gender as the basis for analyzing gender representation in media practices. Many of the arguments in this paper are derived from social criticism, literary theory, critical theory and philosophy, and postmodernism.

As a final remark, this session makes a contribution by beginning to sensitize practitioners and academics to the full-range of gender construction. By juxtaposing different approaches to the study of the representation of gender in advertising, we hope to have made a meaningful start. More detailed abstracts of the individual papers are presented next.

#### OBSERVATIONS ON GENDER IN ADVERTISING

*Rena Bartos, Rena Bartos Company*

This talk provides observations on gender and advertising garnered from twenty years of industry experiences. Throughout her career, the author has analyzed the women's market, sex-role stereotypes, and how to communicate with women consumers through the media.

The paper outlines the author's approach to the study of gender and draws from the work

described in *The Moving Target* (1982) and *Marketing to Women Around the World* (1989). The relationship between gender portrayal and advertising effectiveness is considered. The author recommends that advertisers study consumer reaction to sex-role portrayal as part of their standard copy testing procedure. In the author's experience the like/dislike reaction of consumers to advertising is a good way to capture the emotional and attitudinal responses of consumers to gender imagery. Recent research indicates that the like/dislike scale is a better predictor of sales than other copy testing methods.

#### ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF SPOKESPERSON AND ANNOUNCER GENDER ON THE COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS OF ADVERTISEMENTS

Mary K. McManamon and Thomas W. Whipple,  
Cleveland State University

A controlled, experiment was used to investigate audience reaction to male and female spokespersons and announcers in advertising messages. Based on the results of content analyses and the predominant use of men as commercial announcers, it was hypothesized that male voices would be more effective than female voices in advertisements for both gender-specific and non-gender specific products.

Audio portions of commercials for four products (two gender specific and two non-gender specific) were heard by 473 respondents. Announcer gender and spokesperson gender were manipulated in each commercial. Respondents evaluated one commercial for each product using a series of ten items tapping cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions. Based on the results of a factor analysis, the ten items were used to form two variables labeled "effectiveness" and "irritation." These variables were used as dependent measures in a MANOVA with independent variables of the gender of the target audience, the spokesperson, and the announcer.

For non-gender specific products, the target audiences found male and female voices equally "effective" as announcers and the female voice more "effective" than the male as a spokesperson. For gender-specific products, respondents rated the same-sexed spokespersons and opposite-sexed announcers as more "effective." With respect to "irritation" level of the commercials, male respondents found male spokespersons to be less "irritating." Female respondents, on the other hand, found a spokesperson less "irritating" if he or she was the opposite sex of the user of the gender-specific product.

The study showed that women are equally "effective," and in some cases, more "effective" and "less irritating" than men both as spokespersons and announcers in commercials.

#### AUTHORIAL PERSPECTIVE IN ADVERTISING: A CASE STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

Nancy Artz, University of Southern Maine

This paper introduces a new approach to the study of gender representation. With the exception of visual imagery research (Goffman 1976, Kilbourne 1987), content analyses of advertising have focused on easily quantified, well-defined sex-role stereotypes (c.f., Courtney and Whipple 1983). In the simplest case, sex-role portrayal has been categorized as traditional or modern. This simplistic view of sex-role portrayal has been a useful start, but is limiting. For example, why are consumers with traditional sex-role orientations sometimes the most enthusiastic supporters of advertisements depicting non-traditional occupations? Clearly consumers respond to the attitudes and emotions symbolized in an advertisement and not just to the depicted occupations (Bartos 1982). We can go beyond simple categorizations of portrayed sex-roles by using the approach of the structural semiotician, Boris Uspensky (1973). Uspensky states that the viewer uses the structural elements of an artistic composition (the ad) to interpret the ideological perspective of the author (the advertiser). The author's ideological perspective or world view includes the author's attitudes toward men and women. The author's perspective may or may not be similar to the sex-role orientation of the focal character. To the extent that viewers respond to the ideological perspective of the author and not just the literal image of a focal character, it is important that we look at the totality of the advertisement and not just at the occupation of focal character when studying the portrayal of gender in advertisements.

Uspensky has outlined a detailed, technical approach to analyzing the author's perspective. This paper introduces this structural approach and shows how this approach provides a richer characterization of gender portrayal. Propositions are offered about the types of executional factors that contribute to gender portrayals.

#### FOR A CRITIQUE OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN ADVERTISING

Alladi Venkatesh, University of California, Irvine

##### Background

During the period dating from the mid-70's to early 80's, consumer researchers began to respond to the changing demographic forces by initiating some early studies on the role portrayals of women in advertising. The work of Courtney, Whipple, Belkaoui, and Wortzel, to mention a few, were primarily focused in this direction. A more generalized version of this theme (the changing roles of women) came under a broader inquiry within the field of marketing (not just advertising), as reflected in the works of Bartos, Debevec, Gentry, Iyer, Roberts, Venkatesh, McCall, Douglas and a few others. A major part of this work was motivated by the changing consciousness embedded in the

social/political activism of the "women's movement." Although this was a vigorous start and promised to be an ongoing research stream, one of the shortcomings of the marketers' approach to the whole issue was that there was no particular theoretical framework driving their empirical work, nor did the results of their empirical work produce any noteworthy theoretical ideas for others to follow. Consequently, much of the work came to a halt, so to speak. The blame should not be attributed to marketers alone since the women's movement itself was first a social movement rather than an intellectual movement, and was very similar in its genesis and development to other movements such as consumerism, which also suffered a similar fate after the initial activism had died down. As Epstein (forthcoming) has noted, "The fact that the movement's appeal is based more on the strength of its own vision than any direct link to the daily concerns of existing communities gives it a certain fragility. A movement constructed almost entirely on the process of political action can easily dissolve."

A related aspect to this lack of theory in marketing literature, which limited genuine intellectual dialogue was the fact that the approach employed by consumer researchers was essentially based on an analytical-functional framework rather than a critical one. For example, it was argued that the best way to deal with the changing demographic scene was to coopt the essentials of the change tendencies into appropriately altered media representations and marketing practices. The sooner it was done, the argument went, the more effective the response. This, according to the critics, resulted in the problem of quickly turning an underdeveloped and underinvestigated concept into a questionable "praxis." (I use the term praxis in the Aristotelean sense of human conduct which has both practical and ethical implications, rather than in a Marxian sense of a synthesis between theory and practice.) The reason why this is termed a questionable practice is that if indeed one of the goals of the women's movement was (and still is) both freedom from media exploitation and true emancipation, the media, instead of participating in this process, raised the exploitation to another notch or moved it to a different arena. In other words, it was exploitation in a new form, or as Peggy Lee's sardonic ballad of disappointment asked the question, "Is that all there is?"

Much has been said and written in the last ten or fifteen years, and we are in a better position to understand the true nuances of women's movement and feminist ethos. We, as consumer researchers, can both look back and think forward in our analysis of the underlying issues, and this is really what this paper will attempt to accomplish.

#### Present Study

The purpose of this proposed paper is to describe feminist theory and its different interpretations in critical-historical terms, and use them as the basis for analyzing gender

representation in media practices. Attention will be paid to different schools of feminism, which is not a monolithic concept. These schools can be classified as liberal, marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, historical, cultural/structural, existentialist, and postmodern. While there is some common agreement among different schools regarding the goals of the feminist movement, and some schools are closer to others in their overall configuration, there are differences in approaches and philosophical assumptions on gender construction and representation. Because of space limitations, the paper will not attempt an exhaustive account of the various developments in feminist theory, but will highlight important trends. I shall rely on representative contributions for elaborating various ideas. These will include the ideas of Mill, Friedan and Steinem (Liberal School), Boserup, Davis, MacKinnon (Marxist school), Dworkin, Jaggard, Millett, Rich (Radical school), Chodorow, Gilligan (Psychoanalytical school), Scott (Historical school), Ortner, Rosaldo (Cultural/Structural school), De Beauvoir (Existentialist school), Cixous, Fraser, Irigaray, Kristeva (Postmodern school). For the purpose of this paper advertising is viewed here primarily as a representational system, a discursive practice, and a cultural discourse -- and only secondarily as an economic institution.

#### Some Basic Arguments

Recent developments in feminist theory have provided us with important distinctions between various terms such as sex, sexuality, sex roles and gender. In the now famous 1964 issue of *Daedalus*, the term "gender" does not even appear in the index. But today, it is an all-encompassing term. Only a quarter of a century ago both gender and sex were treated almost synonymously to signify the biological differences between men and women. In contemporary discourse, gender is understood as a cultural category which goes beyond the biologically based distinction between masculine and feminine, and refers to the social organization of the relationship between sexes in personal, institutional and socio-cultural terms. A discussion on gender cannot escape reference to such varied theoretical categories as sex (referring to a biological category), sexuality (referring to power relationships based on body as the focal socio-cultural category), sex-roles (referring to the social-psychologically based patterns of identity), mothering (referring to the psychoanalytical dimensions of reproduction and domesticity), division of labor (referring to the social-economic dimensions of work.) In sum, gender is a complex construction of the social system that defines the relationship between the two sexes. It must be understood in its historically rooted and culturally constructed context and not in the simplistic terms that consumer researchers have incorporated it into their work.

By providing a deeper understanding of gender construction, I hope to initiate a fruitful

discussion on advertising images of both men and women in a critical/constructivist manner.

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