

**Representation of Women in Web 2.0 Advertisements Through the Lens of Critical Media  
Studies**

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## **Representation of Women in Web 2.0 Advertisements Through the Lens of Critical Media Studies**

In the context of the modern world where new media platforms are increasingly being introduced, the advertisement is a crucial element, which defines the perception of society, including gender perception. Feminist movements have seen remarkable progress in the fight for gender equity in different fields, yet digitized advertisements continue to portray women in a stereotypically limited capacity. This essay will discuss the portrayal of women in Web 2.0 advertisements and whether these advertisements support or subvert gender roles. In this essay, I will claim that although there are signs of change toward the more positive portrayal of women, many digital ads still maintain the conventional gender norms, sexualize women and perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards. This is because the objectification of women in advertising is still prevalent there has been a transition to less sexist portrayals. Also, in many advertisements women are portrayed as caregivers, wives, or as sex objects, ideas that are unhealthy and place the women in restricted roles in society. However, even though there has been a shift towards more positive and inclusive representations, digital advertisements frequently reinforce toxic beauty standards and gender roles, using sex appeal to grab the audience's attention.

Patriarchal gender stereotypes are still prevalent in digital advertisements, where women are portrayed based on their physical attractiveness and housework. However, although much has changed in the fight for gender equality, media advertising still preserves the stereotype, especially in social networks Instagram and Twitter, where women are depicted as housewives or caregivers rather than working and independent women (Smith et al., 2023). These representations portray the domination of the patriarchal model, where women are depicted in passive positions, as

subordinates, while men are presented as strong and dominating. Such ideologies shape society's expectations and reduce women's worth to mere caregivers, not their careers or personal achievements. Women are still portrayed in television ads of products like detergents, soap, shampoos, and fashion accessories in caregiving or domestic roles, which again depicts a limited role for women in society. These ads contribute to such stereotyping in that while portraying women as domestic and beautiful, they promote the view that women should serve others, thus supporting the stereotype that women should stay at home. Smith et al. (2023) opined that these portrayals are not only stereotypically 'rampant' but are actually stereotypically 'regressive' in their portrayal of women as professionally and personally dependent and limited in their choices. Such representations make women appear as helpless and powerless entities which goes against the grain of fighting for the rights of women and their freedom behind the campaigns and advertisements.

A social concern of digital advertisements is that women are often depicted in a sexualized manner, with emphasis placed on their faces. Social media channels such as Instagram and twitter objectify women, supporting unrealistic beauty standards that conform to the gender stereotype (Perez, 2013). This objectification makes it appear that the value of women is in their physical characteristics, which includes smooth skin, big eyes or beautiful lips and not their personhood. These narrow representations continue to enshrine unrealistic beauty standards, which are detrimental to women's body image, especially young women who may feel compelled to adhere to these standards. Since social media platforms promote the usage of filters that change appearances, pressure to conform to the mentioned standards is heightened, as advertisers display what constitutes acceptable modes of femininity. This is in line with the attention economy where the ads are likely to center on physical appearance in the hope of drawing the attention of the

consumers toward their products while at the same time reinforcing the negative stereotype that women should be physically attractive. This objectification of women is not limited to beauty products, as they are portrayed in passive and sexualized positions while advertising non-beauty products, which maintains the notion that the female is a sexual object. This mirrors hegemonic cultural values that affirm male sexual entitlement and objectify women, restricting their roles to sexual objects and traditional femininity (Media Texthack Team, 2013).

However, the portrayal of women in traditional gender roles and objectification continues to prevail, though there is a shift towards the portrayal of women in more progressive digital advertising. As the topic of gender equality becomes more prevalent in the public domain, companies are gradually realizing the need to portray females in various empowered and diverse capacities. As highlighted by Gray in his 2021 article, there has been a shift in the representation of women in some brands where women are portrayed not only as strong but also as women of different body types, ethnicity, and achievements. This shift is part of the change in the general social environment, where the consumers, especially the young people, are demanding less sexist and more empowering representations of women in the advertisements. Some of the many reasons that have forced companies to change their form of advertising and image of women include; Today, brands understand that presenting women in powerful positions, including managers, athletes, businesswomen, and activists, can be effective in engaging consumers. According to Gray (2021), this shift is still ongoing and is a small improvement in the direction of improving gender equality in advertising but most ads are still sexist and objectify women. But the latest campaigns of advertising which are more profound to include more women indicate that there is a change in how women are being portrayed in the media. Companies such as Dove and Nike have come up with powerful advertising campaigns that focused on the positive image of women and their

strength as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below. These campaigns not only subvert conventional beauty paradigms but also assert women's rights, which states that women should not be valued based on their looks. These advertisements further depict women as self-reliant and capable, which goes against the traditional societal norms that have been set for women. Although the change is gradual, it is a positive move towards the portrayal of women in a more realistic way that will assist in eradicating stereotype advertising that is imposed by traditional advertisements.



**Figure 1:** Dove launches ad to eliminate beauty stereotypes in video games for women and girls (Boecker, 2023).



**Figure 2:** Nike's latest ad empowering women (Brar, 2019).

Despite such changes, the transition to portraying women in a more empowering and diverse manner is still gradual and inconsistent. In many adverts, it is still possible to note the use of stereotypical and objectionable figures of women and men. According to Davis (2021), while there is some improvement, the majority of advertisements still perpetuate gender stereotypes with women depicted as beautiful homemakers instead of career-minded individuals. For instance, while advertising household products, cleaning products, and beauty products, women are depicted as being solely responsible for housework and child care. This is a clear indication that hegemonic gender norms still prevail in societies, thus, dictating the roles and responsibilities of women. Also, many advertisements still portray women in sexually suggestive poses thus perpetuating the objectification of women as mere tools of appeal to male consumers. While there has been a clear tendency in advertising toward the portrayal of women as empowered and autonomous, the continued prevalence of stereotypical gender roles indicates that change is gradual and that cultural prejudice deeply infiltrates the advertising industry. The current society is a product of

advertisement where traditional gender roles have been endorsed, and it is for this reason that advertisers may be hesitant to deviate from these norms as they are effective in reaching the audience.

Analyzing the role of women in Web 2.0 adverts one can observe the continuation and perpetuation of stereotyping of women as well as the shift to the new more progressive representations of women. While many digital advertisements perpetuate traditional gender roles and objectify women, there is a shift towards more progressive and empowered representations. However, the shift towards gender equality in advertising is gradual, and there are numerous brands that continue to use stereotypical images to promote their services and products. The critical media studies perspective makes it easier to consider the role of advertising as a mirror of the society and its ability to change at the same time. In the future, it will be important for the brands to keep on breaking stereotyping and come up with other empowering messages for women in advertisements. In this way, the positive image of women in digital media can contribute to the creation of a society where women are valued for their strength, independence and uniqueness rather than being defined by sexual attractiveness and domesticity.

## References

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## CHECKLIST\*

\*Papers without a completely filled checklist will be deducted 5 points automatically.

1. Is your topic related to **communication** AND **social change** (must be related to both)?

**YES** NO MAYBE

- a. If NO or MAYBE, how can you improve it?

2. Is your topic related to either *current social and political issues* or *past events that were mediated by communication technologies* in some way?

**YES** NO MAYBE

- a. If NO or MAYBE, how can you improve it?

3. **In which of the available final paper categories can you place your topic?** Select all that you think is applicable:

a. The role of communication in social change in Canada and abroad

b. Historical overview of the influence of media

c. Critical media studies

d. Critical theory and the rise of the cultural industries

e. Current topics on social change and online media

f. Political economy and media ownership

g. Mass media, politics, social control and change in the public sphere

h. Perspectives on the internet, web 2.0

i. The surveillance society

4. Is your proposal from 1250 to 1500 words long not including title page, references and the checklist (approx. 4-5 double spaced pages of the essay body) long?

**YES** NO MAYBE

- a. What is the word count of your proposal? 1564

5. Is your proposal written in Times New Roman, Calibri or Arial, font size 11pt or 12pt?

**YES** NO

<b>THESIS STATEMENT</b>
-------------------------

1. Does your thesis have a clear and specific claim?

**YES** NO

2. Does your thesis have two main arguments and a counter-argument?

**YES** NO

3. Write your thesis statement:

In this essay, I will claim that although there are signs of change toward the more positive portrayal of women, many digital ads still maintain the conventional gender norms, sexualize women and perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards.

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[ARGUMENT 1]

Because the objectification of women in advertising is still prevalent there has been a transition to less sexist portrayals.

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[ARGUMENT 2]

and in many advertisements, women are portrayed as caregivers, wives, or as sex objects, ideas that are unhealthy and place the women in restricted roles in society.

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[COUNTER ARGUMENT]

However, even though there has been a shift towards more positive and inclusive representations, digital advertisements frequently reinforce toxic beauty standards and gender roles, using sex appeal to grab the audience's attention.

**4. Which course concepts did you apply? List all the concepts.**

- 1 Critical Media studies
- 2. Hegemony
- 3. The attention economy

**5. Can you find all the concepts that you are using in the list of concepts available in the assignment description?**

**YES**            NO

**6. Did you define course concepts using the course readings?**

**YES**            NO

<b>SUPPORTING EVIDENCE</b>
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**1. Did you use at least 3 external academic references?**

**YES**                      NO

**2. Did you use at least two media examples?**

**YES**                      NO

**3. Did you provide links for your sources? Both academic articles and media examples.**

**YES**                      NO

**4. Do you have up to 2 relevant images or graphics labelled as Figures and cited in APA?**

**YES**                      NO

**5. Are your in-text citations according to APA?**

**YES**                      NO

**6. Is your references list according to APA?**

**YES**                      NO

**7. Do all of your in-text citations connect to a reference in the reference list?**

**YES**                      NO

**8. Are all of your references in the reference list present as in-text citations in your paper?**

**YES**                      NO