

**Jacobs, S. (1995, November 7). Women in Advertising: Man is She Angry! When it Comes to '90s Women, Madison Avenue Decides that Rage Sells. The Boston Globe, pp. 59, 63.**

## **OVERVIEW**

Coca Cola is selling Diet Sprite. In the TV commercial (test run in certain areas) a woman with perfectly coiffed hair and a stylish, trim business suit sits down at a bar next to a stranger. Without introduction she begins:

All men are liars. They say they love you, but they don't. They say they love kids but forget to tell you they already have two. They tell you the bandage on their finger is from fishing.

Pausing, she grabs his drink, takes a swig—and then asks what it is. The man answers amiably that it is a Diet Sprite. Staring at him in disbelief, she sips the drink and asks again. Then suddenly she throws the drink in his face, spits out, "Liar," and marches off. What's going on here?

The Avalon magazine ad shows a well dressed couple at a table. With pouted lips she dumps a bowl of ice cubes into her companion's lap. It looks like the glasses and bottle of spring water will follow. He is looking down at his crotch in dismay. The text states: "Do What Comes Natural."

The stereotype of the 1990s woman is that of the male-bashing angry professional—"mappies"—as dubbed by Barbara Lippert of Adweek. A string of ads fosters this image. A bald, screaming woman in a Levi's ad explains: "Getting It Off Her Chest." Subaru's TV commercial shows a woman working on her car in denim. She murmurs about how condescending men are, how much she knows about the world of sports. Bob Garfield, an advertising critic with Advertising Age, analyzes the message of that ad: "Men are scum. Buy Subaru." A 1993 Hyundai commercial uses two women to carry on a raunchy, not-so-subtle commentary of men's genitals—putting down their expensive sports cars by implication. A popular Diet Coke ad shows women oogling a half clad construction worker. What do these advertisements suggest?

Some women are concerned that these ads are creating a new stereotype of women as "hysterical shrews who'd have been better off if they stayed home." Lippert adds:

What it's saying is working women don't have their emotions under control, that they are really angry and empty-wombed. They should really be at home in the kitchen. Their problems stem from defying nature. So now they're hysterical, over-employed and under-fulfilled.

Coca-Cola spokeswoman Susan McDermott interprets these ads quite differently. They do not depict women's anger or hatred toward men but that things are not always what they seem:

The (Sprite) ad is not meant to be a comment on broader social issues. The whole idea is to get people to think about the way they perceive things. The woman is a foil to present a paradoxical situation, that a diet product tastes as good as a nondiet product. The unexpected twist of throwing the soda suggests that Diet Sprite tastes better than you think it does.

Similarly, Dave Iwans, whose Group III Communications of Norfolk, Virginia made the Avalon spring water ad, sees these ads this way:

I wouldn't call the women in these ads angry; I would say they are assertive. They're feeling their oats a little more, and good for them. If the guy is misbehaving, take matters into your own hands. Put an end to it. Throw your drink on him. It plays to that feeling out there—that's what struck a good chord.

The article traces the history of women's ads, beginning with Listerine's 1932 pitch: "When lovely women vote." It suggested that women who can vote for the right candidates can choose the right toothpaste. Advertisers have focused on women throughout most of the 20th century. For half of it, their concerns were mostly seen in terms of what they were supposed to be: perfect in appearance and service in the home. As women joined the workforce, ads helped them make more efficient use of their limited time. Gradually, in the 1960s and 1970s, images of independence were introduced, and this theme took off in the 1980s ("You've come a long way, baby.") Some consider the "angry" ads as an extension of this trend.

Leslie Savan is an advertising columnist for the Village Voice. She has written [The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture](#). Here is how she reads the current ads and spirit among women:

One thing we're angry about, according to advertisers and real life, is that we have so much to do. Can we be perfect and do it all and have it all? Women have a lot of anger at the roles they have had to play.

So advertising, which always wants to reflect social forces, says, "We're going to be a pal to women. We're on your side; we understand your problems, and if we can prove that to you in 30 seconds then you're more likely to feel favorable to our product." It creates lots of goodwill.

Shulamit Reinharz, a professor of sociology at [Brandeis University](#), goes a step further:

Women are angry. Women are not heard. So maybe they have to throw water or Sprite to be heard. Instead of making a serious comment about it, though, advertisers are using it to sell soda.

The Nike ad, "[If You Let Me Play](#)," seems more honest and challenging. Young girls in this 30-second ad say things beyond their years:

If you let me play I will be 60 percent less likely to get breast cancer...I will suffer less depression if you let me play sports...I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me...

Leslie Savan makes a final comment:

Anger alone will turn people off. But this (Nike Ad) works. You like not to feel you're wandering in the wilderness alone, and so someone recognizes your predicament and you're likely to latch on to them. That's good advertising.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. How have magazines and advertisements influenced your life? How do you feel about yourself and your life situation these days?
2. With what attitudes about women, advertising, and gender stereotyping did you view this article? How has it confirmed or challenged your feelings and beliefs?
3. Do you agree that advertisers try to reflect what is going on in the culture? To what extent do you think they also influence people and establish trends?

4. Magazines that run ads such as those discussed here are typically aimed at women ages 25 to 35. How much do you think they reach and influence girls and younger women? Realistically, how much influence do they exert? What countervailing influences are at work?
5. How would you discuss these issues with girls and boys in elementary and middle schools? How different would your discussions be with older teenagers?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. The use of this article is not to incite a feminist debate. It is primarily to consider advertising influence and methods. Also, it is interesting to note how women are seen and treated.
2. Women do control a great amount of the spending in most societies. Therefore, they are specially targeted by advertisers.
3. All nations want to improve their gross national product (GNP). One way to do this is to stimulate consumption of goods and services. Societies expect advertisers to promote their national growth.
4. Not only women but young people and children of both genders are affected by advertising images and themes. Those who care about them must help them develop skills of discernment regarding that which helps and that which hinders their growth to womanhood, manhood, and civilized relationships.

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