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# Ana Blloshmi

## Advertising in Post-Feminism: The Return of Sexism in Visual Culture?

*This paper explores the phenomenon of 'ironic sexism' in advertising in the post-feminist period in UK and US culture. This study considers 'ironic sexism' in contemporary advertising, and the different ways 'ironic sexism' presently functions in advertisements aimed at men and advertisements aimed at women. Undertaking close semiotic analysis of examples of advertisements, mostly from the second decade of post-feminism (2010s), revealed that advertisements aimed at women communicated 'ironic sexism' by allocating a sense of 'power' to the women, albeit sometimes exaggerated and mockingly, in a way that advertisements aimed at men did not. The study asks whether such 'ironic sexism' in advertising, presented as simply 'having a sense of humour about gender stereotypes' is part of a wider and continuing backlash against feminism, which has now paved the way simply for the return of a patriarchal gaze in advertising; without the need, increasingly, to mask this with 'knowing' irony.*

Keywords: Post-feminism, ironic sexism, advertising, backlash



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### INTRODUCTION

Western feminism is commonly divided into three, perhaps four, periods (Whelehan 1995; Faludi 2006; McRobbie 2009): first-wave feminism which has been said to date back to the 1840s (Hewitt 2010); second-wave feminism dating from the mid 1960s to the 1980s (Whelehan 1995); post-feminism which is generally agreed to have taken hold in 1990s and continues today (McRobbie 2009); in addition some academics have written of third-wave feminism since the 1990s (Levy 2005). Epitomised by the suffragette movement, women's rights to property and to the vote were the focus of the first-wave (Noble 1974; Pankhurst 1977; McQuiston 1997). The second-wave also focused on material rights such as equal pay, fighting against the 'glass ceiling' (Faludi 2006). In a mass-media age however, second-wave feminism also contained strong critiques of the representation of women in visual culture. Advertising in particular was the subject of second-wave critique as documented by academics such as Butcher et al.

(1974 cited Talbot 2000), Williamson (1978) and Winship (1981 cited Talbot 2000). In the August of 1970, women's movement groups in Washington joined together in a rally, which was amongst the largest to take place in Washington since the suffragettes (Valk 2008). The rally aimed to gain recognition for paid and unpaid work carried out by women and encourage a boycott of a series of cigarette, dishwashing liquid and feminine hygiene spray brands, on the basis that they were deemed to belittle women in their advertising (Valk 2008). This was one of many such occurrences, part of the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement, as a result of which the advertising industry responded by acknowledging feminism. An example of this is shown in the Virginia Slims advertisements which suggested "we've come a long, long way. Virginia Slims. ...At last, a cigarette we can call our own" (Talbot 2000, p.180). Second-wave feminism came to a close in the late 1980s, and the 1990s saw the rise of the 'new man' (Carter and Steiner 2004; Gauntlett 2008) in aid of the backlash to feminism with magazines such as *Loaded*, whose tagline was, and still remains, "for men who should know better" (*Loaded Magazine* 2013). It is apparent that neither in the realm of visual culture, nor in the realm of advertising did feminism disappear. As outlined by Stephenson-Abetz (2012, p.97), feminism has provided a vocabulary to discuss issues regarding sexist representations of women in particular "calling attention to the exploitation of women's bodies in advertising".

"Sexism and gender stereotypes in advertisements received a large amount of attention in the 1970s and '80s and continues to be one of the focal points of feminist media critique" (Falkner 2000, p.113).

The Collins English Dictionary (2000) defines sexism as "discrimination on the basis of sex, especially the oppression of women by men". Congruent with this definition, Cameron (1985) adds that today sexism also refers to the exclusion, insulting and belittling of men alongside women. However, as Leiss (2005), Gauntlett (2008) and McRobbie (2009) have noted, the 1990s saw the rise of 'ironic sexism' in advertising. 'Ironic sexism' has been described as "an ironic and reflexive form of address which acknowledged the consumer's savviness with a knowing wink and nod" (Leiss et al. 2005, p.317) the logic of which states "sexism is now sufficiently outmoded to be considered funny" (Ging 2005, p.37). Currently it would seem that UK and US society is reconsidering feminism, as emerging discussions in the public media sphere centre around the sexualisation of young girls (BBC News 2007; NSPCC 2011; Jeffries 2013) and 'rape culture' (Theriault 2013) in light of recent high profile rape cases involving those archetypes of contemporary 'lad' or 'jock' culture, such as the case of Ched Evans (BBC News 2012) and Steubenville (Dragon 2013). It can be argued that this is leading to the emergence of third-wave feminism, which is evident in activism such as the 'Slut Walks' popularised in recent years. Both in the US (Huffington Post 2011) and UK scantily-clad women have taken to the streets in "demand [for] justice and protection of rape victims" ([Slutwalk London 2012](#)).

This paper explores the phenomenon of 'ironic sexism' in advertising in the post-feminist period in UK and US culture. This study aims to consider 'ironic sexism' in contemporary advertising, aimed at both male and female consumers. While 'ironic sexism' in advertising has been considered by Leiss et al. (2005) and McRobbie (2009) in a broad sweep, there is a gap in the research examining how 'ironic' sexist appeals in advertisements aimed at women differ from those aimed at men. This paper undertakes close semiotic analysis of examples, mostly from the second decade of post-feminism, the 2010s, and the different ways 'ironic sexism' presently functions in advertisements aimed at men and advertisements aimed at women. It draws on Barthes (1973) and Williamson (1978) employing in-depth semiotic analysis to "explore connotative

meanings” extracting “what is ‘hidden’ beneath the ‘obvious’” revealing “how the same text may generate different meanings for different readers” (Chandler 2002, p.215). The study asks whether such ‘ironic sexism’ in advertising, presented as simply ‘having a sense of humour about gender stereotypes’ is part of a wider and continuing backlash against feminism which has now paved the way simply for the return of a patriarchal gaze in advertising without the need, increasingly, to mask this with ‘knowing’ irony.

#### Ideologies Surrounding Femininity In Visual Culture

Beyond its primary recognition as a method of introducing and promoting products and services, advertising is a form of popular culture that also serves an ideological function through which shared social meanings are both reflected and produced (Williamson 1978; Jhally 1987; O’Shaughnessy and Stadler 1999). There is not yet one single definition of ‘ideology’ which is able to holistically establish its meaning. Of the many understandings of ideology that Eagleton (2007, p.1) presents, the following is considered most appropriate to this study- “the process of producing meaning, signs and value in social life” and “ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power”. Williamson (1978, p.13), drawing on the work of Marx (1970) and Althusser (1971) on commodity fetishism and alienation, argues that “people identify themselves with what they consume” as opposed to “what they produce”; and thus objects come to categorise people (Baudrillard 1994). According to Baudrillard (1994) this occurs through an acceptance of the connotative meanings that advertisements present as common sense (McCracken 1988). Advertisements achieve this by creating a false sense of freedom to detract from the truth that, unbeknownst to them, viewers are performing a set of pre-determined motions. In Pascal’s words “kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (Althusser 1971, p.163). Williamson (1978) argues that the way in which advertisements achieve this is illustrated through Althusser’s (1971) theory of interpellation- the “transforming [of] concrete individuals into concrete subjects” simply through the act of hailing “Hey, you there!” (Williamson 1978, p.50). In responding to the call the individual recognises the hail was meant for him and thus he is subjected into a ready-made role (Althusser 1971). Advertising interpellates audiences in a similar fashion; the manner in which advertisements address viewers creates a position for them and subjects the viewer into a pre-determined role without consent.

The way in which women appear in visual culture has been created by and creates a series of ideologies that surround the notion of femininity, many of which present it to be subordinate to masculinity. Whilst sex remains a definitive biological difference, gender is purely a socially constructed concept (Goldberg 1977; Kimmel 1987; Fejes 1989) that is “neither essential nor innate but enacted, performed” (Butler 1989 cited Leiss et al. 2005, p.285). Thus ruling ideologies have an influential role in establishing the meaning of masculinity and femininity. Several content analysis studies into the portrayal of women in advertising have revealed that, largely, women are limited in their roles often depicted as inferior and thus dependent on men (Courtney and Lockeretz 1971; Wagner and Banos 1973; Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976; Goffman 1979 cited Jhally 1987). Winship’s (1980) analysis of advertising in women’s magazines revealed that many of the ideologies that emerge from advertisements aimed at women reinforce ideologies of beauty, sexuality, motherhood and domesticity. A dominant ideology of femininity in UK and US 1950s advertising is domesticity, which is connected with the ideals of motherhood (Winship 1980). Among the first to carry out content analysis examining the portrayal of women in US advertisements, Courtney and Lockeretz (1971, p.94) coded and grouped 729 advertisements into the following four stereotypes of women: “A woman’s place is in the home”; “Women do not make

important decisions or do important things”; “Women are dependent and need men’s protection” and “Men regard women primarily as sexual objects; they are not interested in women as people”. These findings are supported by Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976, p.172) who conducted content analysis in a comparative study in the US, concluding that advertisements had “not kept up with the times” as they were not presenting women in the vast roles they play today. They particularly objected to the portrayal of women as unemployed and in “decorative roles or idle situations” or low-income earners with little purchasing power which had altered slightly from 1958 to 1972 (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976, p.170). Moreover Lysonski (1983 cited Duffy 1994, p.10) pointed out that for women, to be viewed as powerful within society is “to be pictured in traditional male roles”.

Often depictions of women in the media present aspects of presently socially constructed forms of femininity, which are not necessarily considered sexist in themselves. However the context in which they appear in the media is often deemed sexist by the feminist movement. With reference to advertising, this is partly on account of the short-form nature of the communication. Goffman’s (1976 cited Jhally 1987, p.134) study suggests that because advertisements are an “extremely concentrated reflection of one aspect of our social life” such images don’t stand out as alien to us. Hence often women in advertisements are limited in the settings they are portrayed (Women’s Monitoring Network 1981). The second-wave feminist movement did produce a shift away from common stereotypes of women in advertising such as those discussed above, this is discussed in more detail later in this paper, however today it can be argued that advertisements continue to suggest to women that to be a good mother they must purchase the right domestic product. For example, Ariel washing detergents claim to clean stains completely therefore mothers can now allow their children to play and explore outside to their hearts content. Similarly, it is found that ideologies surrounding beauty have not altered significantly in the past few decades with Barthel (1988) providing the view that beauty has traditionally been viewed as a path to achieving social status through attracting a suitable husband. Winship (1980, p.22) points out that, although its relation to men goes unmentioned, men are assumed to be “the imagined absent spectator” of women.

In the 1980s, the Women’s Monitoring Network (1981) carried out a research project titled ‘Sexism in the Media’, selecting a series of days in which printed media in the UK was scoured for sexist images. Women’s groups and individual women across the country sent collections of newspaper clippings, illustrations and advertising material that they deemed sexist, producing six reports in total. Although the reports didn’t seek to formally define their subjective interpretation of sexism, themes of patriarchy were recurring in all six reports. For example in ‘Women and Food’ (Women’s Monitoring Network 1981, p.12) the way in which advertisements present the “male-defined” image of the ideal woman as concrete is highlighted. Similarly in ‘Women as Sex Objects’ women are depicted as belongings of their male owner.

#### Patriarchy And The Male Gaze

“Patriarchy is any system of organization ... in which the overwhelming number of upper positions in hierarchies are occupied by males” (Goldberg 1977, p.25).

Goldberg (1977) argued that biology dictates patriarchy as the natural order confirmed by statistics that revealed that males obtain most positions of power, be it political or business. However the male role is also multi-faceted and masculinity itself maintains its own hierarchy to which different *types* of men are allocated. Exploring masculinity in relation to the media, Hanke (1990) outlines the following hierarchy: hegemonic

masculinity, conservative masculinity and subordinate masculinity. Often mistaken as the 'male role' hegemonic masculinity refers to a distinct form of masculinity to which those young and effeminate, both male and female, are subordinated (Carrigan et al. 1987 and Connell 1987). The Marlboro man, the macho cowboy character developed in the popular cigarette advertisements of the 1960s and 1970s, epitomises hegemonic masculinity. By contrast, subordinated masculinity is portrayed as weak in relation and is often characterised by the gay man, more closely associated with lesbian women than hegemonic males. Somewhere between these resides conservative masculinity that is described as "sensitive, nurturing men, aware of themselves and their feelings" (Lehrer 1989 cited Hanke 1990, p.192). In a patriarchal society, the hegemonic male is deemed dominant over femininity and other forms of masculinity (Hanke 1990).

"Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance" (Hooks 2004, p.18).

Hooks (2004) questions Goldberg's (1977) biological argument by stating that patriarchy functions as a purely ideological function (Bradshaw 1992) equally supported by both men and women, despite the fact that it is a system that is more rewarding to men. Patriarchy however is equally damaging to men as, through "passive male absorption of sexist ideology", they are denied "full access to their freedom of will" thus they cannot rebel against it (Hooks 2004, p.27). Berger (1972, p.41) crudely summarises the patriarchal male gaze by stating that in visual culture "men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at". Thus advertisements injected with ideologies of sexuality encourage women to enjoy their sexuality in a narcissistic, heterosexual manner, but to do so "through the eyes of men" (Winship 1980, p.25). Berger (1972 cited Carson 2000, p.25) goes on to illustrate, with reference to Genesis' depiction of Adam and Eve, nakedness is in the mind of the beholder and notes that, according to conventions, the female nude becomes an "objectified possession of the male spectator-owner".

This patriarchal male gaze however, does not go unchallenged. It was, in particular, confronted by second-wave feminism such as the example of the 'Page 3 bill', which emerged in the early 1980s. An impromptu speech delivered by British MP Clare Short in 1983 on women's fear of sexual violence led to a questioning of the influence of sexualised images of women in popular visual culture, specifically the Sun's infamous 'Page 3' girls. The 'Page 3' bill aimed to remove what is described as "pornography from the press" (Short 1991). What followed over the next three years was a campaign that received widespread media coverage, both objections and support. The result of this was a short-lived removal of the 'Page 3' nude imagery. Despite the perseverance of 'Page 3', Short (1991) highlights the importance in raising questions against such examples of the patriarchal male gaze. Writing in relation to advertising, Jhally (1987) highlights that in general, feminist critique of the way women are portrayed is often unsuccessful as it doesn't acknowledge the appeal of advertisements and thus they are interpreted as critiques against the viewers. Niblock (2000) advises that such critiques be focused on the power structures, the advertising ideology which invites viewers to take pleasure in images of women, in order to consume products. In a similar fashion, Hooks (2004) makes a point of replacing popular terms such as 'male chauvinism' and 'sexism' with the root of the cause- patriarchy.

The ideologies of femininity and the male gaze discussed above function as myths within patriarchy, with the understanding that Barthes (1973) provides of the term not

as untrue, but rather uncontested, subconscious assumptions accepted as ready-made facts as opposed to products of shared societal beliefs (Strate 1992). These myths seek to maintain a certain kind of masculinity as socially superior by defining it against both femininity and 'other' kinds of masculinity. Through interpellation, by producing ready-made roles and facts, advertising creates and reaffirms well-established gender myths in order to make the proposition of a product socially acceptable and therefore more attractive.

#### Second-Wave Feminism and Advertising

Dahlerup (1986) defines second-wave feminism as a second peak in a Western feminist movement that has stretched over a century. Like all feminist eras, the second-wave is difficult to pinpoint in time. The first sparks of the second-wave emerged in the US with 'The Feminine Mystique' in the 1960s in which Betty Friedan (1963) explored and brought to attention a feeling of frustration sweeping women of all classes as a result of the lack of fulfilment and challenge they experienced. Whilst most of the relevant literature agrees that, as it is virtually impossible to precisely locate the second-wave in time, it is thus inadvisable (Whelehan 1995); however it is also generally agreed that the period stretched over two decades to the late 1980s. Referred to as the "heyday of second-wave feminism" (Walter 2010, p.138) the 1970s were a significant decade in which the liberating effects of the second-wave were mirrored in advertising such as the emancipation of women's sexuality and their expression of it. Winship (1980) documented the impact of the second-wave feminist movement as it emerged in advertising. She notes how the image of the domestic family serving "mother" that dominated advertising in 1956 had altered to the "scheming" girlfriend- "the 'carefree' girl without attachment to men, who has a gay and exciting time by herself", and the narcissistic nude woman who is involved with her own sexuality in 1968 (Winship 1980, p.15). By 1974 these images had not so much been replaced, but rather extended. As Winship (1980) highlights, the housewife became the hostess, a glamorous and stylish woman serving guests in addition to family but serving nonetheless. Similarly the narcissist is presented as more self-indulgent with stronger direct sexual connotations. Betterton (1987) supports this stating that the decade stretching from the late 1970s to late 1980s saw recognition of women's changing roles amongst advertisers as they began to capture women in different roles, maintaining respect and authority.



**Figure 1- Miss Selfridge 'Take a long look into the new'; UK; 1970s**



'Respect' and 'authority' is exemplified in the advertisement in Figure 1, which shows two women smartly dressed in soft tailoring. The tagline "Take a long look into the new" speaks to viewers, announcing a change. Moreover the worm's-eye view used in the shot creates a notion of power, further supported by the straight pose of the women without the "bashful knee bend" which is popular in mages of women (Goffman 1976). Similarly the advertisement in Figure 2 also speaks directly to women signifying a change by making explicit reference to the past. The simple use of the personal pronoun "you" is "very clever since it is in fact a mass appeal, yet each individual reads it in relation to himself" (Williamson 1978, p.52).



**Figure 2- Virginia Slims 'You've come a long way'; US; 1960s**



However the peak in the women's movement seemed short-lived as the 1980s saw an overlap between second-wave feminism and the backlash that led to the post-feminist era. An examination of magazine advertisements in relation to the goals of the second-wave movement revealed that, whilst advertisements presented women in a wider variety of roles independent of men and domestic settings, there was an increase in those that depicted women in decorative roles (Busby and Leichty 1993). By the late 1970s, although much visual content of advertisements had altered, audiences were still addressed in such a way that invited them to view women in traditional roles (Betterton 1987).

#### Backlash: Advertising in Post-Feminism

In 'Backlash: The undeclared war against American Women', Faludi (2006) examines the shortcomings of the second-wave in her examination of what she calls the 'backlash' in the women's movement. Faludi (2006, p.9) echoes Friedan (1963) in attempting to identify the cause behind women's unhappiness, which she accounts to a "powerful counterassault on women's rights" by convincing them that their liberation was the problem. Whelehan (1995, p.126) accounts a "rapid decline" in political feminism to be the initiator of what Faludi (2006) refers to as an 'identity crisis'. Wolf (1990) discusses

the beauty myth as a weapon employed by the backlash in aid of patriarchal control. Although an unorganised movement the backlash, which has since been identified as post-feminism, is nonetheless impactful and evident in postmodern advertising texts (McRobbie 1994). Postmodern advertising is a phrase that encapsulates the changes that have occurred in advertising as a result of the societal transformation taking place since the 1980s (McRobbie 1994; Leiss et al. 2005). Among the first American academics to comment upon postmodernism as it emerged (McRobbie 1994), Jameson (1984) noted that visual culture was an early adopter of postmodernism, its influence being visible in the surface meaning of art. McRobbie (1994) presents the understanding of postmodernism as confronting issues which otherwise remain uncovered, nullifying the influences of modernist discourse. Irony has emerged as a key characteristic of postmodernism insofar as it achieves this while maintaining a distance from the past (Hutcheon 1998), representing responses to a subject rather than the qualities of an object.

This ironic element is presented in postmodern advertising as a cynical humour that draws on audiences' existing knowledge of popular culture "to present visual puns: stereotypes, self mocking forms of humour" (Leiss et al. 2005, p.483). Hence 'ironic sexism' has manifested itself in post-feminist advertising, clearly apparent in the paradigmatic choices and their positioning within the syntagmatic plane (Barthes 1973), which reduces feminism to "the status of a mere signifier" to be "re-encoded by advertisers as a sequence of visual clichés and reified signifiers" (Goldman 1992, p.131). Leiss et al. (2005) note that, ultimately, advertisers have not essentially altered the way in which they address female audiences, but rather rely on their tolerance (Ging 2005), concealing sexist tropes in 'tongue-in-cheek' humour and in doing so avoid media criticism. Advertisements achieve this by:

"taking feminism into account by showing it to be a thing of the past, by provocatively 'enacting sexism' while at the same time playing with those debates in film theory about women as the object of the gaze" (Mulvey 1975 and 1989 cited McRobbie 2009, p.16).

The result of 'ironic sexism', also known in feminist popular journalism as 'hipster' or 'retro' sexism (Williamson 2003; Sarkeesian 2010; Quart 2012; Wallace 2012), is that advertising images continue to present women as objectified, confined to domestic roles, the inferior sex, and maintained under the patriarchal gaze.

What follows below is a semiotic analysis of advertisements exploring the ways that 'ironic sexism' differs in advertisements based on the gender of the target audience. In her exploration of billboard advertising to women in 1990s Britain, Winship (2000) refers to Berger (1972), noting the way in which men and women interpret images of women differently. Congruently, the way in which advertisers present images of women to men, or other women, also differs. This is apparent in the advertisements in this study and will be further illustrated below. This paper will build on McRobbie's (2009) 'The Aftermath of Feminism' as it investigates 'ironic sexism' in advertisements from the second decade of post-feminism. It will consider questions such as whether 'ironic sexism' is paving the way for a return to unchallenged, unmasked sexism? The appeals of 'ironic sexism' in advertising will also be examined and whether 'ironic sexism' appeals to women nevertheless positioning them as 'players in the game' of patriarchy?

#### 'Ironic Sexism' and Sexual Objectification

The backlash period marked a turn not only for the feminist movement but also for masculinity and what it means to be 'a man'. Epitomised by 1990s popularised magazines such as FHM, Zoo and Loaded, an emerging 'lad' culture flourished and became stapled in society (Nixon 1996). Alongside 'the lad', the 'retrosexual' man, a term

coined by Simpson (2006 cited Anderson 2008), also became a manifested figure in the feminist backlash. The 'lad' is characterised as 'fun' and rejects traditional adult responsibilities maintaining his childhood essence (Fuller 2002; Benwell 2003) while the 'retrosexual' man has been described as a "misogynist man who is a cross between classic icons of the marauding frat boy, the caveman, the football linebacker, and the regular Joe" (Anderson 2007, p.5). These two overlapping figures of masculinity, the 'lad' and 'retrosexual' man, are prominent in post-feminist advertising, an example of which is the Post-it advertisement reproduced in Figure 3. It depicts a scene of 'the morning after' in which, after a drunken one-night-stand with a conventionally attractive woman, a seemingly 'average' man has placed a Post-it on his partner's forehead with her name so that he will remember it once they wake up. The tagline "For the things you'll forget" grammatically identifies the woman as a 'thing' as a result of the man's actions in the narrative (Williamson 1978), an unimportant object that will soon be forgotten. The man is depicted as a typical retrosexual 'lad' through the suggested 'frat boy' behaviour, the suggested drinking and one-night-stand, and the antifeminist act of placing the Post-it note on the woman. In doing he instantly victimises her in a joke as a result of which she may be hurt and angry when she wakes up. As the man is the protagonist central to this advertisement, it is aimed at men and thus invites them to identify with the retrosexual 'lad'. However the ironic layers in this advertisement aim to draw attention away from its misogynist nature. Most obviously, the situation in which the Post-it note has been used exaggerates a well-known movie scenario to absurd proportions and is highly unrealistic.

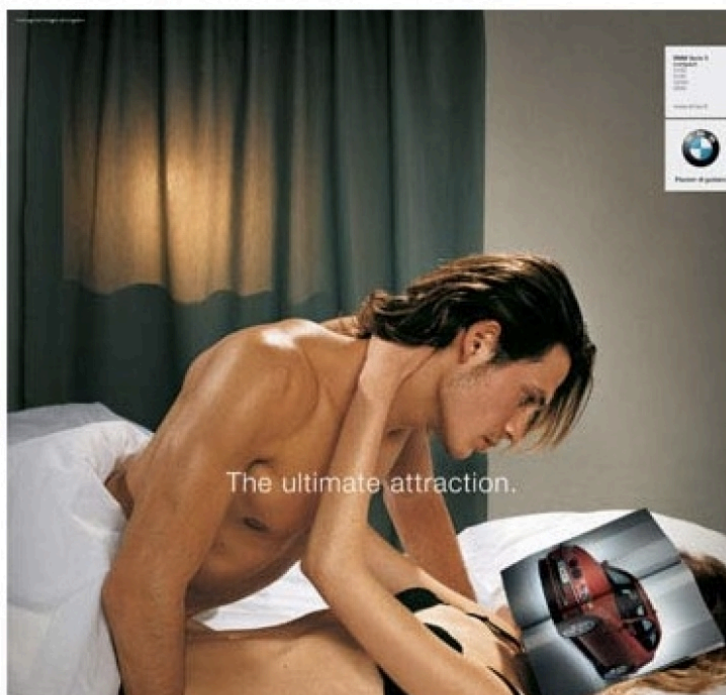
**Figure 3- Post-it 'For the things you'll forget'; US, 2006**



Adding to the comedy of the scene, the advertisement features a retrosexual 'average Joe' (Anderson 2008) in contrast to the rather glamorous woman, thus suggesting the viewer is invited to laugh *at* him as well as *with* him. The advertisement is 'knowing' – aware of

the fact that this is a sexist scenario but makes no effort to conceal this, as it laughs at it but also with it thus inviting viewers to do the same. In a similar nature to Figure 3 the BMW advertisement in Figure 4 presents a scene of a casual encounter in an anonymous hotel between two people who have just met. As a result of the magazine placed over her face, the qualities of the car are projected onto the woman. The hidden mouth and eyes leave her without an opinion and stripped of emotion; thus she is objectified as a machine, a car, to be controlled and driven by the man. This advertisement is aimed at men, inviting them to identify with the man, as his desires are the subject of the advertisement while she is merely an object onto whom his desires have been projected. However the audience's gaze is encouraged to laugh *with*, but also laugh *at*, the man on account of his suggested European/ Latin descent, which British men have long regarded as suspicious and laughable; hence he is rendered slightly ridiculous in his obsession with the BMW as "the ultimate attraction". The post-feminist element of this advertisement is that whilst it signals that it is aware of its objectification and invites viewers to laugh at the male figure, at the same time it does not overturn this order but ultimately reinforces it. Both advertisements present 'man: woman', 'subject: object', 'dominant: submissive' and 'active: passive' as binary opposites (Barley 1983). As previously noted, sexual liberation for women was an essential feature of the second-wave movement (Levy 2005) however the juxtaposed imagery presented in the advertisement in Figures 3 and 4 reverts back to a patriarchal suppression and gender stereotypes. These binary oppositions between masculinity and femininity have been embedded in Western culture since Aristotle (Ward 2008), something which feminism seeks to challenge.

**Figure 4- BMW 'The ultimate attraction' UK, 2010 (see appendix two).**





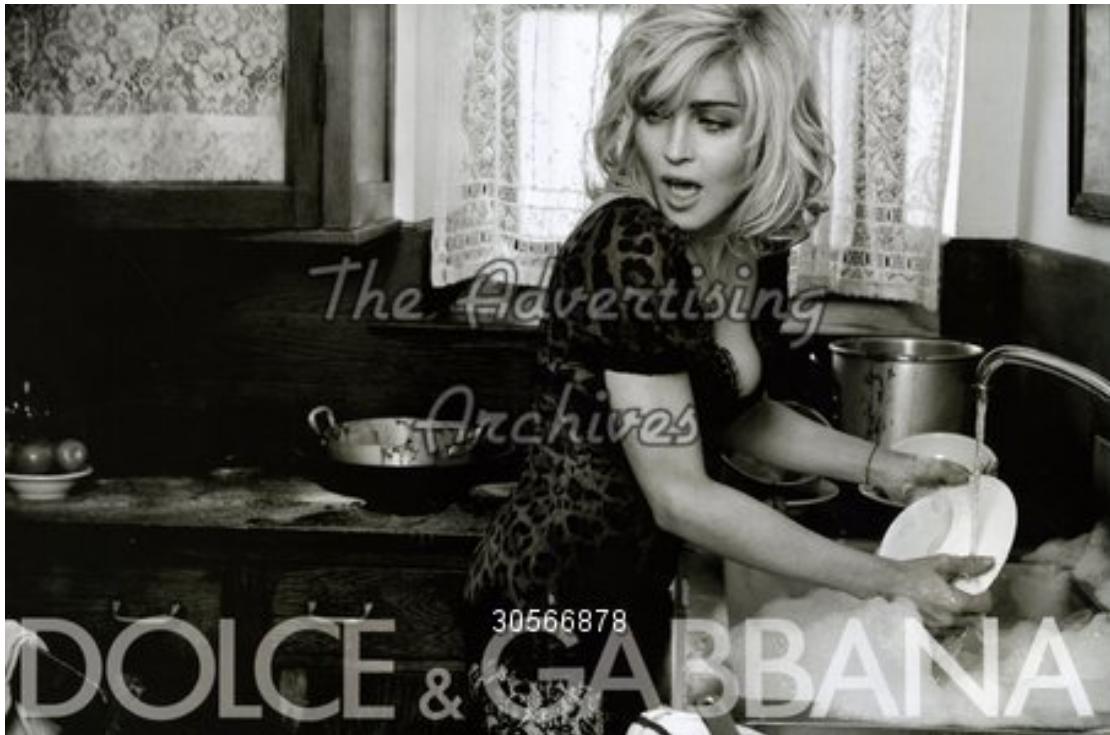
“The slave is wholly lacking the deliberative element; the female has it but it lacks authority; the child has it but it is incomplete” (Aristotle cited Ward 2008).

It is interesting to imagine the effects of the advertisements if the roles were reversed (Leiss et al. 2005) and the Post-it and magazine were placed on the men’s heads instead. The advertisements would still indeed maintain their humorous elements, however the women may be judged as promiscuous and narcissistic in a way that the men are not.

‘Ironic Sexism’ and a Woman’s Place

The following, Figures 5 and 6, will evaluate how ‘ironic sexism’ is used in advertisements aimed at a female audience.

**Figure 5- Dolce & Gabbana ‘Madonna’; US 2010**



This advertisement is aimed at women as signified by the protagonist at the centre of the advertisement, the character Madonna is portrayed as, with whom the intended viewers are invited to identify. In doing so they are also interpellated (Williamson 1978) into not one, but arguably two pasts. Firstly the 1960s setting, but secondly there is a new take on the classic ‘woman in the kitchen’. Contrary to the advertisements aimed at men in Figures 3 and 4, this advertisement aims to position itself as a feminist advertisement, using irony about sexism to ‘empower’ the woman while at the same requiring her to conform to the following:

“My mother said it was simple to keep a man, you must be a maid in the living room, a cook in the kitchen and a whore in the bedroom”  
Jerry Hall (1985 cited Sherrin 2008, p.201).

The advertisement portrays Madonna styled as a woman who combines a ‘rock chick’ look with hints of the image of a porn star, as suggested by the familiar inviting ‘open mouth’ (Williamson 1978) pornographic pose, a ‘retro’ style reminiscent of the 1960s era, epitomised by her hands in the sink. The advertisement gives the perspective that she is choosing to be at the kitchen sink, either an exception or as part of a night of fun and seduction. As outlined, the advertisement does to an extent conform to the aforementioned quote and it could be argued that she is being a ‘maid’, a ‘cook’ and a ‘whore’ however it ironically suggests that this is only because she is ‘choosing’ to do so.

In the following advertisement (Figure 6) the woman demonstrates what is essentially the task of pouring a drink into a glass, as a challenging task. This is highly reminiscent of Betty Friedan’s (1963) ‘Feminine Mystique’ in which she describes how frustrated housewives of the 1950s sought to create challenge in their lives by complicating domestic tasks. The irony in this advertisement stems from the way in which the nostalgic element, another key characteristic of postmodern texts (Hutcheon 1998), has been utilised. The woman is portrayed as a typical 1950s housewife however she prepares and drinks the beer for herself, rather than for her husband as would have more likely been the case in the 1950s. Instead the advertisement ‘knowingly’ utilises the stereotype of a ‘henpecked husband’, who is portrayed as somewhat homosexual as a result of his effeminate mannerisms and posture (Sabo and Jansen 1992) in order to exaggeratedly ‘empower’ the woman.

**Figure 6- Crabbie’s Ginger Beer ‘Only for Grown-Ups’; UK 2011**



The woman is clearly the main character with whom the audience is invited to identify as she maintains the ‘power’ over her ‘henpecked’ husband in this advertisement. This is unusual in beer advertisements, which are typically aimed at men and invite viewers to identify with conceptions of masculinity while images of femininity take a background secondary position (Strate 1992). The product advertised however, is more popular among female consumers (Waitrose Media Centre 2010) hence the advertisement targets a female audience. True to beer advertising conventions however, this



advertisement presents the 'dominant' character, the woman, as masculine by the virtue of the man's overt femininity. Hooks (2004) uses the term 'psychological patriarchy' to describe the way in which qualities regarded 'masculine' are naturally praised while those 'feminine' maintain the opposite effect. This further adds to the irony of the advertisement by suggesting it 'empowers' women by using feminine qualities to devalue the man. McDonald (1997) identified three stereotypes of women which were dominant in the years between World War One and World War Two: 'the capable household manager', 'the guilt-ridden mother' and 'the self-indulgent flapper'. While the advertisements in Figures 5 and 6 do hint at female 'empowerment', it is interesting to note that, decades after World War Two, they can still be categorised within the aforementioned stereotypes as identified by McDonald (1997). The D&G advertisement (Figure 5) plays on the stereotype of 'the self-indulgent flapper', while the woman in the Crabbie's Ginger Beer advertisement (Figure 6) is depicted as 'the capable household manager'. This adds to the irony of the advertisements as it suggests not much has changed in the portrayal of women since the 1950s.

#### 'Ironic Sexism' and Technology

To illustrate more clearly how the implementation of 'ironic sexism' differs, in relation to the sex of the target audience, advertisements within the same category have been selected. Figure 7 shows a Samsung digital camera promoted by reality TV star Amy Childs. The intended viewer of this advertisement is female evident not only in the product, a pink digital camera, but also reinforced by Amy acting as the principle figure in the narrative of the image. Her pose, in particular her facial expression, carries strong connotations of the 'silly little woman' throwback stereotype signified by the finger brought to the mouth suggesting a "disassociated, unthinking fashion" (Goffman 1976, p.60). This is evident in the way in which her head is tilted slightly to one side and her finger is placed next to her mouth suggesting she is trying to think, but the blank look on her face maintains a lack of understanding. This is a clear throwback to a time when it was accepted that beautiful and attractive women would need to hide their intelligence in order to remain attractive to men. This was epitomised by Marilyn Monroe: "if I play a stupid girl, and ask a stupid question, I've got to follow it through. What am I supposed to do, look intelligent?" (Monroe cited IMDb 2013). The advertisement does so 'knowingly', drawing on the historic 'dumb woman' advertising cliché, with its tongue in its cheek, ironically. Hanisch (2006, p.4) describes this as a myth stating that "women as oppressed people act out of necessity (act dumb in the presence of men), not out of choice". It implies that both the advertisement and the viewers know that she is not really 'stupid'. This is partly evident in the fake 'knowingly stupid' pose but also in her achievements of fame and money, something society is expected to want (Rubin 2000) as a result of playing on this 'dumb', 'ditsy' persona, something women have to do "until such time as the power of unity can take its place" (Hanisch 2006, p.4).

**Figure 7- Samsung 'Too smart for Amy', UK, 2012**



The advertisements aimed at women in Figures 5, 6 and 7 suggest, if only in a jokingly 'tongue-in-cheek manner', that women maintain 'superiority'. This is something the advertisement in Figure 8 does not suggest.

**Figure 8- Go Daddy 'Karl Otter'; UK; 2012**



The advertisement in Figure 8 is overridden with sexual connotations throughout, from the thick tight ponytail signifying a penis and the suggestive stroking of the wet otter, to the conjuring of sexual imagery through the binary oppositions of 'outside: inside' and 'hot: cool'. It can be concluded that the target audience of this advertisement is male, as the aforementioned signifiers aim to construct seductive imagery inviting men to view the woman for their self-gratification. On the surface, these binary oppositions depict the woman as unintelligent by the virtue of her attractiveness and evident sexuality. At a deeper level, they connote that she is unintelligent by virtue of her femininity.

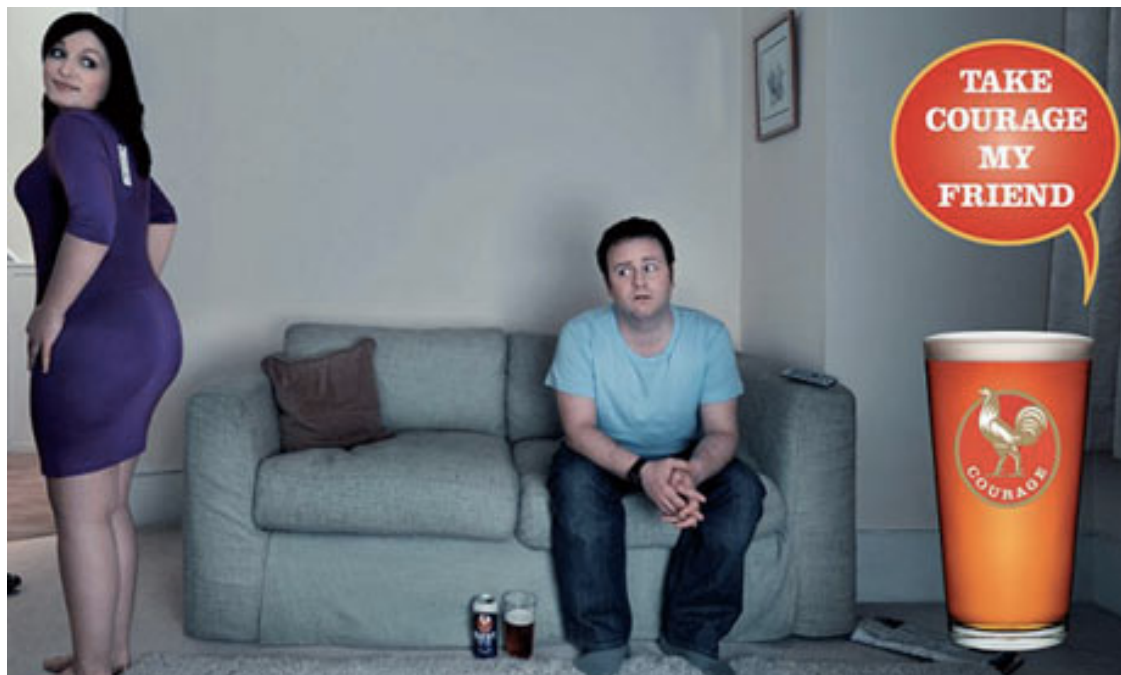
The audience is invited to laugh at the man who is ironically portrayed as 'cool', as suggested not only by the blue hue in the 'cool corner' of the incubator but also by his attempts at 'cool poses'. This is evident as he flips a piece of equipment in the air and catches it with one hand and moreover his dancing 'moves'. In reality the man is short, slightly chubby, balding, with glasses, dressed as an IT technician. He is the opposite of the 'alpha male' hegemonic masculinity (Hanke 1990) that the advertisement suggests he is, and hence it 'knowingly' makes fun of itself. Despite his shortcomings however, the man is still depicted as superior to the woman as she is portrayed to gratify him; she is the 'outside' for him and the male audiences to go 'inside'. This supports the notion that biological differences remain at the core of sexism (Deaux 1999) and patriarchal ruling (Goldberg 1977).

#### 'Ironic Sexism' and the Patriarchal Male Gaze

The Courage advertisement in Figure 9 makes reference to the well-known 'does my bum look big in this?' meme thus adding humour, even if it is essentially making a joke about women's body insecurities. The 'ironic sexism' in this advertisement refers to the positioning of the man as a 'coward'. He is sitting down whilst looking anxious, with the woman standing up, implying that the 'power' lies with her. This draws on the 'henpecked husband' stereotype thus suggesting the woman is a 'battle-axe' ironically trading on "turn of the century portrait poses of couples" which achieves subordination

by showing the man to be the central figure sat down and the woman standing as a supportive figure (Goffman 1976, p.40). In reality the advertisement addresses the man with “Take courage my friend”, and it is the woman who is seeking approval, thus the power actually rests with him. The position of the woman’s hands, touching herself, signifies a direct invite to the male gaze (Goffman 1976). The woman is depicted as a needy, insecure and delusional sexual object while maintaining that the joke is, in fact, on the man. In turn, the woman is illustrated as stupid for not realising her bum looks big and needy for asking the man for his opinion; yet she is also positioned as ‘overbearingly powerful’, as he fears her wrath if he answers her incorrectly.

**Figure 9- Courage ‘Take Courage My Friend’; UK 2009**



“It is a common view that women spend much more of their time and concern in shopping for clothes and preparing for appearances than men do, and that women set considerable store on the appreciative or depreciative response they produce” Goffman (1976, p.51).

The Lynx advertisement in Figure 10 is an example demonstrating the shift from ‘ironic sexism’ to sexism alone. While the advertisement is part of a wider campaign that does maintain some ‘irony’, alone it does not show ironic layers in the way that the advertisements in Figures 3 to 9 in this study do. Interestingly, it embodies aspects of many of the categories examined in this study.

Figure 10-Lynx 'Lucy Pinder Full Control'; UK; 2011



The excessively large turkey signifies a tanned, buff, muscular and oiled body similar to that of the man in the BMW advertisement in Figure 4. The turkey appears to be propped up on its elbows, with its legs apart whilst she looks surprised, suggesting she has been caught in the act of fellatio. The entire advertisement, both the visual imagery and the prompt to watch a video, uses intertextuality of pornographic videos (Williamson 1978). Adding to the sexual imagery, the colour of her lingerie match the oven gloves, which conceal the underside of the turkey, thus they become unified (Williamson 1978) and the colour purple acts as a censor similar to that often found in pornography. Moreover, the placement of the advertisement online further reinforces this, as the pornography industry is vastly based online. In this way the woman is sexually objectified to indulge the male audience, further reinforced by the denotative invite to the patriarchal male gaze as it prompts audiences to watch the video and test whether she can “make you lose control”, signifying climax. Furthermore, the kitchen setting and domestic narrative reinforces many of the stereotypes found in previous studies. It is interesting to note that the radio has the Lynx logo very faintly printed upon it, however the oven does not. Lynx is a male product thus this paradigmatic choice and its positioning within the syntagmatic plane (Barthes 1973) suggests that the radio belongs to the man and thus, by default, the oven belongs to the woman. In relation to the semiotically analysed advertisements in this study the popular advertising convention of ‘sex sells’ must be taken under consideration. Lysonski (2005) points out there is a fine line between sexy and sexist. Feminists themselves often disagree on whether an advertisement is sexy or sexist (Lipman 1991). Nokes (1994) defines ‘sexy’ advertisements as those that reveal men and women “enjoying themselves - and each other” and advertisements that depict women as “powerless objects to be used by and for the gratification of men” as sexist.



## CONCLUSIONS

In 'Cool Capitalism' McGuigan (2009) describes the way in which capitalism has come to develop its immunity to criticism by integrating, and therefore neutralising it. He offers several examples of this, however it is most clearly illustrated by the way in which, through offering artists commissions for their work, the "artistic field" [that] was constructed in opposition to the "bourgeois" world" transformed into a popular attraction for them (Bourdieu 1992 cited McGuigan 2009, p.54). In a similar fashion Levy (2005) notes the way in which the female gaze has been incorporated in a patriarchal society. Conducting an analysis of images in women's magazines at the start of the post-feminist era Lysonski (1983 cited Duffy 1994, p.10) concluded that to appear positively women must "be pictured in traditional male roles". Over two decades later, Levy (2005, p.34) confirms the sentiment still stands as she highlights the growing trend in the US for heterosexual women to spend evenings in strip clubs; "why would a straight woman want to see another woman in fewer clothes spin around a pole?" The patriarchal gaze is not exclusively possessed and practiced by men alone, rather the female gaze has been assimilated so that women view other women, and themselves, in the same way men do. Often described as the art of capitalism, advertising too has employed a similar method in the way it has, since the 1970s, incorporated feminism and utilised 'irony' and 'pastiche' to justify 'satirical' sexism as being something other than what it is- sexism.

Added to this, highly influenced by its context, is the transmogrifying character of femininity that has been reflected in the distorted portrayal of women in visual culture. Femininity is "not an absolute" (Kirkham 1996, p.171); rather it has a ubiquitous nature, the ideals of which are dependent on the changes in the feminist movement. The result of this is a blurring of the understanding of sexism and interpretations of women. Goldman (1992) presents feminism as having the potential to challenge the default patriarchal capitalist ideology however in order to prevent this, "elements of feminism have been taken into account and have been "absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life" (McRobbie 2009, p.1). At the height of the second-wave there was a general belief that the feminist cause was complete. Faludi (2006) notes how women congratulated each other believing gender equality had finally arrived; and they had right to do so as there were signs of a societal shift in ideologies surrounding women. For example, in rebellion to the retrosexual 'lad' culture popularised in the 1990s overlap between the second-wave and post-feminism, the pro-feminist androgynous and metrosexual men also emerged as a protest against the feminist backlash, promoting equality between men and women (Fuller 2002). Certainly, in relation to advertising, there was a shift in the settings women were portrayed in and the power relations between men and women and brands, as exemplified by the Gap and Calvin Klein campaigns of the mid 1990s (Fuller 2002). However the backlash movement took hold and in the post-feminist period 'irony' is one method that is increasingly being used to incorporate feminist elements and contain it; reinvigorating the patriarchal gaze.

"[In] mass advertising, feminism takes on a plurality of faces, but its potentially alternative ideological force is channelled into the commodity form so that it threatens neither patriarchal nor capitalist hegemony" (Goldman 1992, p.131).

The way in which the aforementioned is achieved differs based on the target audience. In this study, the advertisements that were aimed at women communicated 'ironic sexism' by allocating a sense of 'power' to the women; albeit exaggerated and false. For these advertisements the strength of the patriarchal gaze is partially concealed under an ironic veil in such a way that the advertisements aimed at men are not. In the



latter, the patriarchal gaze is epitomised by 'ironic sexism'. As outlined by Leiss et al. (2005), there are many appeals of 'ironic sexism'. Since the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, audiences have grown increasingly media-savvy, resulting in leniency and receptiveness to traditionally 'taboo' messages (Leiss et al. 2005). Moreover as Leiss et al. (2005) note, advertisers sought to capitalise on audiences' existing knowledge, rather than fight against it, by positioning advertisements within new delivery formats. For their part, consumers celebrated this recognition, seeing it as the willingness of brands and marketers to subdue their self-significance.

"By exposing "the meta-language that composes the underlying code of advertising" these ads give credence to viewers, treating them as peers who are not being talked down to" (Goldman and Papson 1994 cited Leiss et al. 2005, p.494).

'Ironic sexism' is one way in which advertisers achieve this 'credence' as it insinuates that, while it may contain potentially offensive patriarchal ideologies, it gives the impression that both the advertisement and the audiences understand the 'ironic humour'. Due to the nature of semiotic analysis this investigative study cannot be quantified (Chandler 2002) and thus findings cannot be definitively projected onto the wider context of advertising. It is therefore recommended, future semiotic research is conducted to investigate these findings further. It is a result of advertisers implementing the 'ironic' element in 'sexist' advertisements, advocating the patriarchal ideologies they reinforce, that there is a new trend in advertisements used to depict images of women. It is argued that the 'ironic' element is no longer necessary, and therefore discarded, thus leaving behind a series of advertisements which denotatively present women as inferior under the patriarchal gaze, existing merely for the gratification of their male counterparts. Moreover, these images are being celebrated and imitated as exemplified by the remake of a popular 1994 Wonderbra advertisement by Australian underwear brand Bonds (Campaign Brief, 2013).

Advertising is a significant by-product of popular culture insofar as it reinforces existing ideologies whilst creating new ones. In this way advertising desensitises audiences to these subliminal ideologies therefore neutralising opposition to them. Many feminist and theorists such as Heywood and Drake (1997), Henry (2004) and Levy (2005), have been writing about the oncoming of a third-wave of feminism since the early 1990s. Congruent with other waves in the feminist movement, the third-wave cannot be so definitively and precisely placed in time and its influence is yet to become manifested in current advertising. Third-wave feminism may pose a new threat to patriarchal capitalist ideology. This is evidenced in the increasing examples of dialogue between third-wave feminists and advertisers via social media platforms (Feministing 2011) and the growing popularity of online third-wave feminist blogs and magazines such as Vagenda.com; however implications of the third-wave feminism on the portrayal of women in advertising is yet to be seen.

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