

Conveyance of Brand Identities and Portrayal of Minority Groups in 2013 Superbowl Automobile Advertisements

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Abstract

The fact that brands have unique identities and personalities is well known and researched. However, the extent to which a brand's personality or identity manifest itself in advertising is less known. This study examined how brand identities were conveyed in 10 automobile advertisements from the 2013 Superbowl. It also analyzed portrayal of the women, gender roles and sexual orientation in the advertisements. A qualitative content analysis revealed that the advertisements communicated clear brand identities through storytelling, and contained stereotypical gender roles and sexualized or marginalized portrayals of women.

I. Introduction

This study tried to gain insight into how a brand's personality or identity are conveyed through advertisements, and how these identities may differ among brands. This study also examined the portrayal of women, gender roles and sexual orientation in advertisements. This research tried to find plausible explanations for only differences found among brands in portrayals of these groups,

II. Literature Review

Brand Culture/Identity and Branding

Before addressing how a brand's culture or identity might manifest itself in automobile advertisements, or analyzing how women, gender roles and homosexuals are portrayed in these advertisements, it's necessary to establish what exactly the terms brand culture and brand identity mean. In their seminal text, *Brand Culture*, Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling define brand culture as the cultural influences and implications of a brand. Brands can also influence society with their communicated cultural meaning. How a company brands or portrays itself helps consumers to better understand the company as a whole.

Over time, the process of branding has changed from being merely a means of differentiating one product from its competition, to a tool for managing a brand's personality through numerous brand identity systems (Schroeder, Salzer-Mörling 2006). Brand personality has been defined as a set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker 1997). Consumers often associate brands with human personality

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traits, which are communicated to publics through advertisements aimed at establishing or reinforcing these traits through the process of branding (Aaker 1997). Increasingly, the way in which competing products are distinguished from their competitors is through non-tangible factors. These factors can combine to create an overarching brand personality, which may involve assembling and maintaining a mix of brand values in the minds of consumers (Murphy 2007).

While extensive research exists on how brand culture is developed through branding, further research is needed about how brand personality is processed once it is put into an advertisement. Through a qualitative deconstruction of the advertisements, this research tried to address how this information may be processed based on implicit and explicit cues in automobile advertisements. Further, this research sought to analyze how the human characteristics and traits of a company might affect how minority groups are portrayed in their advertising.

Minority Group Portrayals in Advertising

In order to analyze the significance behind the portrayals of women, gender roles and homosexuals in modern automobile advertisements, it's necessary to explore how these groups have been portrayed in advertising in the past, as well as review the findings from previous research. Historically, women featured in advertisements have been portrayed stereotypically as belonging mostly in the home, being incapable of making important decisions, dependent on men, and regarded or displayed as sex objects (Lundstrom Sciglimpaglia, 1977). Despite women's movements later that saw more women entering the workforce and gaining increased political and economical power and independence, recent studies found only a slight decrease in the stereotypical portrayals of women in advertising, in comparison with earlier studies (Lindner, 2004).

Although cultural advances have occurred in the area of women's rights and equality, advertisements are slow to change their stereotypical portrayals of women over time. Researchers have posited that advertisements are conservative and tied to the prevailing, traditional ideologies of a culture. While some advertisements have changed their portrayal of women, these changes mostly appear to be only superficial, rather than reflective of an actual ideological thought shift in the advertising industry (Kang, 1997).

With specific regard to women and gender role portrayals in car advertisements, the following have been noted. Car advertisements may appear gendered in their portrayals, based on their intended target audiences. Advertisements for larger cars tended to have more masculine visual cues or story-telling techniques, such as portraying driving as a powerful, physical experience, in comparison to small-car advertisements that often compare the car to a woman's body (Thornborrow, 1998). Research has found that when car advertisements appear to be explicitly gendered, the car is female or has feminine traits. When the advertisement has no explicit gender, it can be considered appropriate for female or male audiences. However, it was also noted that apparently non-gendered car advertisements appealed to a more male-associated perspective and experience of driving, and that women's bodies in advertisements were more explicitly visual in advertisements, while male bodies were more textually linked to the driving experience (Thornborrow, 1998).

In contrast to the portrayals of women and gender-roles in advertising, analysis of same-sex oriented individuals or relationships featured in advertisements is still an emerging area of research. It wasn't until the late 1970s that positive images of homosexuals in advertisements first became visible when advertised by progressive brands such as Absolut Vodka. However, the 1990s saw a boom in advertising that targeted the same-sex market, and thus depictions of homosexuals in advertisements have also increased (Sunny Tsai, 2004). Recent research shows that while depictions of homosexuals in advertising may result in disapproval among consumers who are against homosexuality, an increase in brand approval and improved attitude towards a brand may also accompany positive depictions of homosexuals in advertisements targeting consumers who are supportive of homosexuality (Hester, Gibson, 2007).

Advertising can also be seen as a form of negotiated social discourse due to its balance between profit demands and targeted emerging markets—such as the homosexual market—despite being potentially divisive to existing market groups. As more advertisers depict same-sex individuals and relationships, the opportunity for minority groups, such as homosexuals, to gain and exercise economic power in the mass media and marketplace increases through increased advertising presence and the resulting desensitization of being in the media (Sunny Tsai, 2004).

Automobile Advertising Background

Historically, automobile advertising has largely focused on the following themes: vehicle performance, sales incentives, and to a lesser extent, safety (Ferguson, Hardy, Williams, 2003). However, research also shows that automobile advertisements strike a balance between differentiation appeals, such as how a particular model is better than its competition, and emotional appeals to desires and abstract qualities. These advertisements also make emotional appeals to audiences through a balance between ideas such as freedom-constraint, excitement-luxury, and masculinity-femininity (Conley, Tigar McLaren, 2009). Research shows that when differentiating factors among cars are equal, consumers attach a greater importance to apparent emotional and relationship benefits mentioned in car advertisements (Chatterjee, Jauchius, Kaas, Satpathy, 2002).

Despite the importance of emotional appeals and portrayals in these advertisements, and the fact that U.S. car companies spend more money on marketing and advertising than any other domestic industry (Chatterjee, Jauchius, Kaas, Satpathy, 2002), the literature lacks in analysis of the emotional aspect of advertisements, specifically how they reflect their target audiences or brand identities. This study sought to fill this gap by performing a reverse content analysis to deconstruct automobile advertisements and gain insights into the conveyance of brand identities, as well as the portrayals of women, gender-roles and homosexuals in these advertisements.

How Advertisements Reflect Brand Culture

According to previous research, consumers' relationships with brands are often related to prevailing cultural codes and ideologies; and how a brand advertises itself may also reinforce or influence these cultural codes and ideas (Schroeder, 2008). Marketing images are some of the most persuasive tools advertisers use to tell a compelling story or idea to consumers. These images are often reflective of an overall brand culture and usually related to or reflective of the prevailing cultural codes of target audiences, and can influence overall brand meaning in a marketplace (Schroeder, 2008). Critical visual analysis of brand images can reveal insights into the brand dimensions of identity, image, and culture.

Recent research stresses the importance of acknowledging and considering the importance of advertising images' representational and rhetorical power as an indication of cultural codes and consumer preferences (Schroeder, 2008). This research used this knowledge to dissect automobile advertisements and gain greater insight into the advertising target market's social codes, as well as possible differences among automobile manufacturers in how they portray women, gender-roles and sexual-orientation, and what the reasoning behind that may be.

This study has two thesis statements:

1. Different automobile manufacturers have unique brand personalities that are reflected in their advertisements.
2. Portrayals of these distinct brand personalities will be accompanied by differing portrayals of women, gender roles, and sexual orientation in these advertisements across brands – if these groups are included at all.

It also has two research Questions:

- RQ1. How, if it all, do the advertisements of different automobile manufacturers portray brand personalities or identities?
- RQ2. How are women, gender roles, and sexual orientation portrayed in these advertisements by different brands?

III. Method

Sampling

This research sought to analyze advertisements from a specific point in time intended for a wide broadcast audience. It also aimed to be reflective of the differences among brands' own portrayals of their

unique personalities, rather than appealing to niche markets in smaller media outlets. Selected to these ends were advertisements that were aired during the 2013 Superbowl. Only major, mainstream manufacturers were targeted for the study, so ultra-high end luxury brands, such as Rolls-Royce or Ferrari, were excluded. Only 10 automobile advertisements from 7 different manufacturers met these conditions among the 2013 Superbowl advertisements.

Analysis method

This study used qualitative content analysis, deconstructing the advertisements based upon visual and contextual cues and making observations on common themes and differences through the constant comparative method.

When the author deconstructed the advertisements, he worked backwards using visual and contextual cues to determine the characteristics of a brand's portrayed identity and target audience. Using the constant comparative technique of content analysis, the author noted the characteristics of each advertisement and common themes and stark differences among all the advertisements and brands analyzed. Verbal, non-verbal and contextual portrayals of women, gender-roles, and sexual orientation in these advertisements, if they were included at all, were analyzed to determine if different brands portrayed these groups differently.

IV. Findings

The findings were summarized below by research question.

Portrayal of brand personalities or identities

A qualitative analysis of the advertisements revealed general themes. First, brand personalities and identities are conveyed through stories. No matter the car brand, all 10 advertisements told a story involving the car, rather than talking about specific features of the car. In fact, none of the advertisements mentioned a specification or feature of the car being sold by identifying it explicitly.

Second, when brands told their stories, the car was often a backdrop, or perhaps portrayed as a tool to be used to achieve an emotional benefit. The theme of portraying an emotional connection or association with the advertised car came up frequently. For example, in both of Volkswagen's advertisements, the car or brand itself was tied to the positive emotion of their campaign tagline "Get happy." In one of Volkswagen's commercials, a car isn't even mentioned. Instead, it features viral videos of angry people, then goes to a field shot of the formerly angry Internet stars joining hands and being happy. The fact that it's a Volkswagen advertisement doesn't even come up until the ending shot of the advertisement. The inclusion of viral videos,



Figure 1. One of Volkswagen's Superbowl advertisements includes viral video characters, along with hip, positive, folk sounding music, and the millennial-aged characters, reflects VW's target audience.

along with hip, positive and folk sounding music in both Volkswagen advertisements, and the millennial aged characters, reflects VW's target audience (see *Figure 1*).

These factors also reflect VW's apparent intended portrayal of being a hip, modern brand that is aligned with the identity and values of a younger target audience.

While Volkswagen's advertising uses visual cues and storylines to align its brand with a younger, perhaps more progressive crowd, other brands' advertisements are reflective of a far different audience. Specifically, the intended audience for the RAM truck advertisement, based on its portrayal, is very masculine, conservative, and work-driven. The RAM advertisement features a spoken ode to farmers given in the 1970s by Paul Harvey, a conservative radio host, over visuals of apparently hardworking farmers. The commercial has a biblical undertone, with many references to God and Christian values. The nature and topic of this commercial is also reflective of the RAM brand's identity. RAM is a conservative truck brand, intended for a largely rural-use, and thus largely conservative, customer basis.

Although some brands conveyed brand identities through visual cues, others used audio voiceovers to cement their brand personalities. For example, in the Lincoln advertisement the audio voiceover mentions "marching to the beat of a different drum," in addition to the opening line of "It's not what you think. It's a phoenix with four wheels." Both of these voiceovers support Lincoln's identity as a challenger brand, striving to gain market share in an increasingly competitive luxury market that has low interest in Lincoln's current lineup. Through this advertisement's copy that is suggestive of an exciting new product that takes a different approach from their previous offerings, and a rebranding attempt at the ending with the tagline, "Introducing, the Lincoln Motor Company," Lincoln is seeking to establish itself in the minds of consumers as a fresh, new, younger and more innovative brand.

Although most brands analyzed had a clear brand voice or sense of identity, the voices of some brands, especially Kia, weren't clearly translated. Kia appeared to have little common thread in its advertisements, other than appealing to families in one advertisement, and being a bit whimsical in the other. Its advertisements lacked any distinct visual or context cues that would be reflective of a unique brand identity.

Portrayal of women, gender roles, and sexual orientation

Following an examination of recurring themes and key differences, the research moved on to analyze how women, gender, and sexual orientation were portrayed in these advertisements. Although every advertisement analyzed featured at least one shot of a woman, the portrayals of women were most often stereotypical or image-based. Traditional gender roles were commonly reinforced by the portrayal of women in some advertisements, and only heterosexual relationships were depicted.

For example, the RAV4 advertisement by Toyota is set in a traditional, suburban street and features a typical nuclear family with one daughter, one son, and a mother and father. They are greeted by a very feminine "genie" that will grant them wishes. The wife has few speaking lines, and appears to be simpleminded as her wish is for unlimited chocolate. However, this same advertisement also features the daughter asking to be a princess, but then shows a visual of her on horseback in a battlefield, asking for soldiers to avenge her father. This brief and seemingly of non-stereotypical portrayals was not seen often in the other advertisements analyzed, however.

For instance, the VW Beetle advertisement focused the storyline on male workers; while a male is seen driving the car, females only play a minor part. In fact, a male is seen driving the car when a driver is shown in all the advertisements analyzed. On the other hand, when females appeared on screen, they were treated as something to be looked at. For example the Mercedes CLA advertisement portrays a model, Kate Upton, as simply washing the car in slow motion. That's the whole premise of the commercial. A group of young males also gawk at her in this scene. The female's portrayal is highly sexualized, and she appears nonthreatened and rather inviting with ample hair tossing and smiling (see *Figure 2*).

This study found the Lincoln advertisement as evidence that females are in these advertisements mostly for visual purposes. Although viewers never see the driver of the Lincoln, they do see a shot of a girl riding in the passenger seat, arms up and smiling invitingly through the sunroof. Once again, the female isn't driving the car, nor portrayed as someone who would enjoy driving it, but rather as a visual in supporting the narrative being told of how desirable this car is, and how desirable it could make you.

The Audi advertisement analyzed shows a similar portrayal of women. A mother is present in the advertisement in a family setting, but she is not included in the storyline of the car and has a minor role. The



Figure 2. Mercedes' sexualized portrayal of Kate Upton in their CLA advertisement.

advertisement tells a story of a high school boy going to his prom after receiving the keys from his father to the Audi and being told to “have fun tonight.” The car is presented as a sort of boy’s toy, as only males are seen getting enjoyment from it or having interest in it. When the boy arrives at prom, he goes straight over to a girl he likes, who is lighted and presented like an object of desire, and kisses her without any warning or consent. He is punched in the face by her boyfriend after that, but the advertisement glorifies the unsolicited kiss by showing him smiling as he drives away, and flashing the tagline “Bravery. It’s what defines us.”

Most of the advertisements analyzed, when not appealing to family buyers by showing families, appeared to have masculine undertones. For example, in the RAM advertisement the lighting is dark, the farmers shown on screen are all presented as stoic, male, and hard-working laborers (see *Figure 3*). Further, the voiceover being read in the background talks about the time in a farmer’s life when his son takes over the farm, and doesn’t mention the possibility that a daughter could do this as well.



Figure 3. Ram Truck’s highly masculine advertisement.

V. Conclusions

This analysis supported the research's first thesis statement that different brands have unique personalities, which are also reflected in their advertisements. For example, a brand like Volkswagen had a clear brand personality of being fun-loving, easy-going, and targeting a younger audience. All these were evidenced in the advertisements by contextual cues, such as the light-hearted and humorous tone of their advertisements, young main characters, and even the folk-like background music that may appeal to their target demographic. Other brands, such as RAM trucks, also had their brand identities reflected in their advertisements. RAM's advertisement had highly masculine visuals throughout, and a conservative, hardworking, even religious undertone. All of these characteristics are intentionally in the advertisement because they would appeal to RAM's target audience and potential buyers. Although most advertisements analyzed had clear brand voices and identity portrayals in their advertisements, some brands' voices were not clear, especially in Kia's advertisements. They never seemed to use any distinctive visual or textual cues that would be reflective of a clear, larger brand identity, unlike Volkswagen's advertisements.

The second thesis statement that women, gender-roles and sexual orientation would be different along with the differing brand personalities in advertisements had limited support in the results. This study showed that all of these automobile advertisements even in 2013 still portrayed women in a largely stereotypical, traditional gender-role manner across the board, while they did not mention same-sex relationships at all. No clear differences emerged between brands in how these groups were portrayed, because all of them seemed to include women as more of a visual aid in the advertisement, with few speaking roles, and even obvious objectification of women's bodies in some advertisements. Perhaps these portrayals can be explained more by the automobile industry's history of being traditionally a heavily masculine and male-dominated sector, and thus advertisers are pandering to outdated perceptions of men, gender-roles, and the male psyche in these advertisements.

Key limitations of this study include only a small number of advertisements from one event, the 2013 Superbowl. Therefore, the conclusions of this study can't be generalized to a larger sample of advertisements over a different period of time. Future research on the representation of minority groups in the area of automobile advertising could focus on how audiences perceive the portrayals of minority groups. Or further research could examine whether the audience can notice a common theme or brand story portrayed in the advertisements after watching multiple ones from the same manufacturers.

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