

## Portrayals of Women in Super Bowl Advertising, 2016–2021

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in  
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

### Abstract

*The portrayal of women in Super Bowl advertisements, particularly in recent years, has been a topic of significant discourse and discussion. Few studies have analyzed women’s portrayals in ads from the largest annual television broadcast in the United States, and none have look specifically at the Super Bowls within the four-to-six years prior to the writing of this article. To study these portrayals, a content analysis was performed on all the consumer-targeted ads from Super Bowls L through LV using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The general framework for the qualitative part of the analysis included the advertising trend of gender role stereotypes, the “sex sells” paradigm, and the emergence of “femvertising” (ads focused specifically on women’s empowerment). Findings suggest the need for more nuanced evaluations of these portrayals, due to the importance of women’s inclusion and characterization.*

### I. Introduction

In 2015, Carl’s Jr. bought a 52-second spot during the West Coast broadcast of Super Bowl XLIX in order to air their new “Au Naturel” advertisement. While the ad promoted the fast-food chain’s All-Natural Burger, the product does not appear on-screen until the last 20 seconds of the spot. Instead, most of the ad shows model Charlotte McKinney walking through a farmer’s market naked. Male sellers and passersby ogle her, and strategically shaped fruits and vegetables cover the portions of her body that are not allowed to be shown on primetime television. At the end of the ad, McKinney, now wearing a string bikini, takes a bite out of a large burger while a male voice-over provides information about the product (Carl’s Jr., 2015). Before Super Bowl XLIX, Carl’s Jr. was already known for taking advantage of the “sex sells” paradigm in advertising by featuring scantily clad models such as Kate Upton and Paris Hilton, which caused critics to popularize the hashtag #WomenAreMoreThanMeat on social media. A company representative told ABC News that “[the ads] don’t cross the line, but they like to get right up to it” (Davis, 2015). However, “Au Naturel” received even more backlash than previous Carl’s Jr. ads, potentially due to the brand’s ignoring the overall trends of advertising in society at the time.

When television first became ubiquitous in the 1950s, advertisements frequently showed both men and women in stereotypical gender roles—the husband was the family breadwinner, and the wife stayed home to cook and clean. This trend coincided with the end of the first wave of feminism, which primarily pushed for women’s suffrage (Johnson, 2017). Once the second wave of feminism began in the 1960s, media aimed at women generally began to follow the societal movement toward women’s liberation (Johnson,

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**Keywords:** Super Bowl, advertisements, commercials, gender portrayals, femvertising  
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2017). However, television ads intended for a male or general audience depicted women as sex objects more frequently. The third and fourth waves of feminism saw the rise of digital and social media in promoting intersectionality and justice in the push for women's empowerment (Johnson, 2017). Advertisers followed these waves by creating a trend known as "femvertising" in the mid-2010s, which markets products to women—or even to a general audience—by using images of women's empowerment. As one journalist put it, "The advertising industry, once bent on selling us sex, is now selling us its disgust with sexism" (Iqbal, 2015). One of the most praised examples of "femvertising" on television was Always' "#LikeAGirl" ad, which first aired during Super Bowl XLIX—the same event that featured Carl's Jr. controversial "Au Naturel" spot (Iqbal, 2015; Always, 2015).

Two years after the Super Bowl XLIX ad backlash, Carl's Jr. premiered a new spot during the NCAA championship broadcast titled "Dad Is Back." In the ad, an actor portraying Carl Hardee Sr. tells his son Carl Jr. to take down company billboards of naked models and replace them with photos that only feature Carl's Jr. products. The creators of the spot stated that the sexualized ads of the past had made the Carl's Jr. brand "infamous" (Bhattarai, 2017), arguably demonstrating a change in societal attitudes toward the "sex sells" paradigm.

Drawing on these attitudinal changes, this paper aims to examine women's portrayals in Super Bowl advertising, starting in 2016—the year after the "Au Naturel" and "#LikeAGirl" ads premiered—and ending with the most recent Super Bowl before the writing of this article in 2021. This content analysis can be viewed in the contexts of the history of gender stereotyping in advertising, the "sex sells" paradigm, and the recent emergence of "femvertising." But first, a review of the existing literature will contextualize the examination of ads from Super Bowls L through LV.

## II. Literature Review

To lay the foundation for this study, the literature review focused on women's representation in television advertising more generally, the cultural and business significance of Super Bowl advertising, and the analyses that have previously been done of Super Bowl ads, most of which aired before 2016.

### ***Women's Representation in TV Advertising***

Women's portrayals in television advertising have been a topic of interest in both contemporary and historical scholarship. In the 1950s and 1960s, when many households across the United States first purchased televisions, advertisements became pervasive as each channel had to support its programs and used advertising sales as the main way to earn the money to do so. Many of these ads promoted household products such as kitchen appliances and cleaning supplies, and they depicted young, demure women using the products in their homes while their husbands left for or came home from their jobs (Johnson, 2017). These early ads led to the development of three of the four gender-stereotype dimensions that scholars have used for over half a century to describe women's portrayal in advertising. First, a woman's place is in the home; second, women should not make important decisions; third, women are dependent on men (Huhmann & Limbu, 2016).

The fourth dimension of gender stereotyping in advertising is women being depicted primarily as sex objects. This trend escalated in the 1980s and has continued into the 21st century. Portraying women in highly sexualized ways became popular because of the shock factor associated with sexual imagery that causes viewers to pay attention to the ad, creating the "sex sells" paradigm (Marczyk, 2017). At first, most young, educated women who identified as feminists criticized the sexual objectification of women in advertising. However, a 2008 study of female college students noted that while the subjects noticed sexualization in advertising, they did not think it as offensive or unethical as their counterparts in the 1980s had (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). The change in opinions may be explained with the shift from second-wave feminism to third- and fourth-wave feminism. More third- and fourth-wave feminists have embraced the idea of finding their "girl power" in their sexuality than second-wave feminists, and therefore they are often willing to express themselves through their bodies—if this expression happens by their own choice and for their own benefit, not because of pressure from men (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). The women may have seen the object of analysis in the above study as a tasteful, autonomous portrayal of female sexuality and therefore did not criticize the advertisement they watched or the brand that created it.

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While some uses of women as sex objects in television advertising are considered tasteful, others harm the perceptions that both women and men have of themselves. A 1999 study showed a correlation between exposure to ads in which women were sexualized and distorted views of one's own body image. Female subjects exposed to sexualized ads generally preferred a slim figure and viewed themselves as proportionally larger than the women who did not watch the ads. By contrast, male subjects who viewed the sexualized ads tended to prefer a larger, more muscular figure and saw their bodies as proportionally smaller than the men in the control groups (Lavine et al., 1999). Additionally, all four dimensions of gender stereotyping have excluded older women from advertising. When a woman's role is seen as domestic, decorative, and/or sexual, her societal value decreases with age, while a man's societal value in the occupational roles with which he is often associated increases with age (Baumann & de Laet, 2012).

Despite the previously mentioned development of "femvertising" and changing attitudes toward women's sexualization, gender stereotyping in advertising still exists worldwide. On an international level, studies show that women are more likely to be portrayed in domestic or decorative roles in countries whose culture emphasizes masculinity, such as China and Japan, than in "low-masculinity" countries, such as Sweden (Grau & Zotos, 2016, p. 763). The United States appears to fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, with examples of "femvertising" running alongside ads that portray women in domestic roles or as sex objects. Scholars in various fields have debated for many years whether advertising simply reflects society's values or actively shapes them, and women's portrayals in television ads seems to lie somewhere in between (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

### ***Cultural and Business Significance of Super Bowl Advertisements***

The Super Bowl has brought the top teams from each division of the National Football League together to compete for financial rewards, physical trophies, and athletic pride since 1967. Watching the broadcast of the game has become a tradition for many American households. As of 2017, four of the five most-watched telecasts in history were Super Bowls; the 2012 broadcast alone garnered the viewership of 54 percent of U.S. households (Hartmann & Klapper, 2017). Many companies place high importance on advertising during the Super Bowl broadcast, despite the cost. During Super Bowl I in 1967, a 30-second advertising spot cost somewhere between \$37,500 and \$42,500; for Super Bowl LV in 2021, a company would pay an average of \$5.6 million for the same amount of screen time ("Cost of Super Bowl advertising," 2021). These figures do not include development and production costs.

When analyzing the costs and benefits of Super Bowl advertising, most companies see more positive than negative returns on their investments. Insufficient evidence exists to suggest that Super Bowl ads are an effective complement to the products typically consumed during the game—i.e., brands of soda, beer, potato chips, and other foods and beverages associated with sporting events do not see an increase in sales just before Super Bowl Sunday based on whether they have planned to advertise during the game. However, sales revenue of products that advertise during the Super Bowl generally grows not only in the three to four weeks following the game but also in the week prior to each of the next major U.S. sporting event broadcasts—the National Collegiate Athletic Association men's basketball tournament, the National Basketball Association playoffs, and the first games of the Major League Baseball season (Hartmann & Klapper, 2017). In addition, over a selected three-year period, films promoted during the Super Bowl grossed 40 percent more on average at the box office than movies that did not have Super Bowl advertising spots and were released on the same days (Yelkur et al., 2004).

However, viewers' perceptions of brands that advertise during the Super Bowl and their opinions of the ads themselves can also figure into the effectiveness of a spot. If audience members already associate a brand with low-quality products, poor value for money, or customer dissatisfaction, the brand will need to produce a Super Bowl ad that promotes more positive associations for the spot to be worth the cost (Rathiel et al., 2016). In addition, as social media has become increasingly popular, audiences will often discuss Super Bowl ads online for days after the game ends—although some ads receive praise from the public and from critics and others receive backlash, as was the case with the Carl's Jr. spots from Super Bowl XLIX. Depending on the response to the messaging in each Super Bowl spot, this digital word-of-mouth phenomenon can just as easily hurt a brand as help it.

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### ***Past Portrayals of Women in Super Bowl Ads***

Some studies do exist on the portrayal of women in Super Bowl advertisements of the past. A comparative study of ads from the 1990s and 2000s demonstrated that women were depicted in several “non-traditional” roles, such as career-minded high-achievers or athletes, especially in the later years of analysis. The shift in women’s roles could be attributed to brands’ perceptions of changes in their audiences, because companies in product categories typically associated with men (such as cars or beer) saw an increase in female consumers during those two decades (Hatzithomas et al., 2016). However, a later study suggested that while the number of women in Super Bowl ads increased in the late 2000s and early to mid 2010s, and some were shown with more agency, they were not featured as “main characters” or celebrity endorsers as often as men. Women were also frequently treated as sex objects as late as 2017 (Taylor et al., 2019). These scholars’ contradicting perspectives arguably encompass the conflicting advertising paradigms that feature prominently today: “sex sells” and “femvertising.” In addition, while some progress occurred in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in combatting the gender-stereotype dimensions of advertising, Super Bowl spots still had room to make progress in allowing for equal representation of women as of four years prior to the writing of this article.

Despite the existence of these studies, little research has been done specifically on the portrayal of women in Super Bowl ads, and academic studies have not yet investigated the ads from Super Bowls LII through LV. Therefore, this article will fill the research gap by analyzing the content of the ads that were aired from 2016 to 2021.

## **III. Methods**

### ***Research Questions***

The content analysis discussed in this paper sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1a: How often are women featured in the television advertisements that first aired during Super Bowls L–LV?

RQ1b: How does women’s inclusion (or omission) contribute to the storyline and/or message of each ad?

The first half of this two-part question establishes a quantitative foundation for the qualitative content analysis that is the focus of this study. The portrayal of women in an advertisement can only be evaluated if the ad features women at all. The second half of the question opens the discussion surrounding the audience’s perceptions of the women who are featured in the ads.

RQ2: In what ways do these ads portray women considering historical and contemporary trends in gender role stereotypes, the “sex sells” paradigm, and the rise of “femvertising”?

This question builds on the framework established in the literature review of the three common ways in which women are portrayed in advertising—in a traditional role for their gender, as a sex object, or in an empowered manner. The “historical and contemporary trends” aspect takes the history of advertising in account while accounting for the societal changes that affect ad content, as advertising both reflects and shapes society.

RQ3: Does the portrayal of women in these ads evolve or change over time, and if so, how?

### ***Sample Selection***

The ads analyzed in this study were chosen from the full archived lists of Super Bowl commercials on AdAge for each year from 2016–2021. Each Super Bowl broadcast typically features 40–60 unique, original commercials. The sample consisted of nearly all the ads from each year; the only spots that were excluded were those that fell into one of two categories: 1) ads sponsored by a political candidate, because the study

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focused on consumer advertising; and 2) trailers for specific movies, television shows, or video games, because the portrayal of women in these ads would be entirely based on their portrayal in the media source and would blur the line between analysis of advertising and analysis of entertainment media. In total, the sample comprised 311 ads, averaging approximately 52 ads per year.

### ***Analysis of Portrayals***

This content analysis used a mixed-methods approach. After selecting the sample, the researcher watched each ad once to identify all human/humanoid female characters and/or celebrities pictured on screen in each (voiceovers were sometimes noted as female but were not counted as portrayals if a person was not shown on screen). All spots that did not depict any women were marked with the code “no women featured,” counted, and set aside in the quantitative analysis portion of the study. For each ad that did show one or more women, the researcher performed a qualitative analysis of the role(s) of the women in the spot. Identifying factors included the perceived proportionality of women to men depicted; each woman’s position as a main character (the focus of the ad), supporting character (in a role affecting the ad’s storyline but not the focus), or extra (simply appearing in the background); and if/how each woman fit into the portrayal framework of gender stereotyping, sexualization, and “femvertising”/empowerment based on her words, actions, and/or expressions of emotion.

Some common notations made in the coding process for perceived proportionality included the ratio of men to women being “approximately equal,” “more men than women,” “more women than men,” or “all women” (ads with all men were coded as “no women depicted”—see above). For the woman’s position, the woman could be a “main character,” “supporting character,” or “extra,” and the number of lines she had as compared to male characters in the ad was also noted. The portrayal framework notations included “stereotyped/not stereotyped,” “sexualized/not sexualized,” “empowered,” or “just there” (i.e., not fitting into any category).

## **IV. Findings & Discussion**

After the 311 ads were watched, the spots were analyzed quantitatively to see how many did and did not depict women. Once the appearances of women were counted, the qualitative analysis looked at the ideas of perceived gender proportionality, characterization of women, trends in portrayals, and women as part of the bigger advertising picture.

### ***Appearances of Women***

In the analysis of the 311 total ads, the code “no women featured” appeared 58 times, meaning that 253—or 81.4%—of the ads did include one or more women and the remaining 58—or 18.6%—did not. When looking at the change in these numbers over time, Table 1 shows the number of ads broadcast in each year that did not depict any women:

**Table 1: Number of Ads Per Year That Depicted No Women**

Year	# of Ads Featuring No Women	Total Ads Examined	Percentage
2016	13	55	23.6%
2017	14	57	24.6%
2018	11	50	22.0%
2019	9	51	17.6%
2020	5	47	10.6%
2021	6	51	11.8%
Total	58	311	18.6%

In general, the percentage of ads that depicted no women decreased over the six years in question, with the second-most recent Super Bowl (2020) being the one that had the smallest percentage of spots with no women. One theory to explain the slight uptick in 2021 could be casting and production constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a 1.2% difference is relatively insignificant in the long term.

### ***Perceived Gender Proportionality***

In addition to the quantified decrease in the number of ads not featuring women at all between Super Bowls L and LV, the perceived gender proportionality – i.e., the number of women compared to men shown in ads featuring characters of both sexes – seemed to even out over time. Particularly in later years (2019–2021), the ads tended to feature an approximately equal number of women and men, especially among ads that compiled many short video clips with a backing voiceover rather than having a storyline with characters and dialogue. A few major brands that produced compilation/voiceover spots with perceived gender equality include Coca-Cola in 2017 with “Love Story,” in which both male and female friends and couples prepare meals and enjoy time together; and M&Ms in 2021 with “Come Together,” in which approximately equal numbers of men and women apologize for their mistakes by gifting candy to those they have wronged (Coca-Cola, 2017; M&Ms, 2021).

Despite this, each year still featured several compilation/voiceover ads which featured slightly more men than women. WeatherTech’s ads frequently fell into this category—both their 2016 ad “Resources” and their 2021 spot “We Never Left” compiled shorter clips and seemed to show fewer women than men (WeatherTech, 2016; WeatherTech, 2021). Another notable example of this phenomenon was the 2021 ad from Guaranteed Rate titled “Believe You Will.” This spot depicted athletes and other celebrities who overcame tough odds or came back from difficult situations in their lives. However, the ad not only featured more male celebrities than female ones, but the voiceover also provided more details about the men’s life stories than the women’s, adding a layer to the gender disproportionality on-screen (Guaranteed Rate, 2021).

By contrast, some later ads did feature a cast that was mostly or completely female. Most of these ads focused specifically on themes of women’s empowerment. For example, Olay’s 2021 spot “#MakeSpaceforWomen” promoted their corporate social responsibility initiative to support women in STEM careers, and Bumble’s 2019 ad “The Ball Is in Her Court” showed that Bumble is a female-focused dating app where the women make the decisions and initiate conversations, as they can and should in other areas of their lives (Olay, 2021; Bumble, 2019). An exception to this trend is Squarespace’s 2021 ad “5 to 9 with Dolly Parton,” which focused on the company’s ability to help anyone start their own business but showed more women than men taking advantage of this opportunity (Squarespace, 2021).

### ***Characterization of Women***

The concept of perceived gender proportionality applies less to ads in which there is a distinct storyline with characters and dialogue because ads with storylines can have more variation in the position that each character holds. Even as late as 2021, women were more often put into the role of a supporting character or extra in Super Bowl ads than they were featured as a main character. In addition, when women and men were featured as supporting characters together, the man generally had several lines, while the woman was given few to none. A notable ad exemplifying this trend was Bud Light’s 2019 spot “Joust,” in which a king and queen are both supporting characters watching the main character, the Bud Knight, joust (Bud Light, 2019). However, the queen makes only two short statements, and the king delivers much longer

monologues in response. Colgate's ad from the same year, "Close Talker," repeated the trend by putting a man and a woman supporting character together in several situations and always giving all the lines to the man (Colgate, 2019). However, notable exceptions were when a female celebrity delivered the main message of the ad directly (as actress Helen Mirren did in Budweiser's 2016 ad "Simply Put") or indirectly (as was the case with Paralympic swimmer Jessica Long in Toyota's 2021 spot "Upstream")—in these situations, women spoke all the lines in the ads (Budweiser, 2016; Toyota, 2021).

### ***Trends in Portrayals***

When looking at how the portrayal framework of gender stereotyping, sexualization, and "femvertising"/empowerment applies to Super Bowl advertising, the process quickly becomes more complicated than placing each of the female characters into one of the three listed categories. Surprisingly, the concept of gender stereotyping has changed over time in that female characters are not often forced into domestic roles in advertisements—either they have careers, seem to have agency over their positions in the home (i.e., they are content in their roles and are not juxtaposed with a career-focused man), or have a level of ambiguity around what they do besides using the featured product or service in the moment.

One gender stereotype that appeared several times in the earlier years analyzed was the portrayal of women being easily distracted by and fawning over men. This stereotype showed up most notably in ads for car companies, including Hyundai's "Ryanville" ad from 2016 and Honda's 2017 ad "Yearbooks," which could be explained by these companies catering primarily to a male audience at the time and later realizing that women viewers would also be interested in their products (Hyundai, 2016; Honda, 2017). Furthermore, some ads did not show women in domestic roles specifically, but they still showed women doing other activities associated with their gender in contrast to men. An example of this phenomenon appears in Alfa Romeo's 2017 ad "Riding Dragons," in which all the women shown are either ballet dancers or helping the men in the ad as the men build and drive cars (Alfa Romeo, 2017). Kia's "Give It Everything" ad from 2019 also exemplifies this subtle stereotyping, as it shows male students at a local school playing sports while the female students are depicted attending a school dance in fancy dresses (Kia, 2019).

Despite these early examples of stereotyping, female empowerment featured more prominently in ads over time, even if the ad catered to a more general audience instead of specifically targeting women. This tonal shift even happened within some of the same brands based on their ads in successive years, with a primary example being Audi. The company's 2016 ad "The Commander" had only one female supporting character who was arguably not empowered (she appeared on-screen briefly and served as an aide to the main character, a male retired astronaut); however, the 2017 spot "Daughter" and the 2020 spot "Let It Go" both placed the focus on women and showed them as empowered through Audi's initiatives to support equal pay and environmental sustainability, respectively (Audi, 2016; Audi, 2017; Audi, 2020).

Additionally, several women in Super Bowl L through LV advertisements fit into more than one of the three categories or could not be categorized at all. In several ads, including T-Mobile's 2017 spot "#Punished" and Amazon's 2021 ad "Alexa's Body," the same female character is both sexualized and stereotyped as less intelligent and deferential to men (T-Mobile, 2017; Amazon, 2021). Also, in the vein of the third- and fourth-wave feminist idea of women finding empowerment in choosing to embrace their sexuality, some women in the later Super Bowl ads (such as those in Pepsi's 2020 spot "Zero Sugar. Done Right.") could be categorized as sexualized and/or empowered (Pepsi, 2020). Furthermore, a large group of female supporting characters were featured in Super Bowl ads during this time but simply did not fit any of the categories of stereotyping, sexualization, or empowerment, which could occur for several reasons. For example, Heinz's 2016 ad "Wiener Stampede" focused more on the dachshunds dressed as hot dogs in the ad than the humans (including two women) who all stood waiting for the dogs and were dressed as condiments (Heinz, 2016). A slightly different situation occurred with Pop-Tarts' 2020 ad "Pretzel JVN-fomercial," which showed a woman in the background trying the product but focused primarily on the celebrity endorsement from Queer Eye star Jonathan Van Ness (Pop-Tarts, 2020).

### ***Women Within the Bigger Advertising Picture***

Noticeable shifts occurred in the overall collections of advertisements for the years 2017 and 2020, seemingly based on the political climate of the United States. Super Bowl LI took place just two weeks after the presidential inauguration of Donald Trump, and many brands responded to Trump's controversial policies through their ads. The previously mentioned "Daughter" spot by Audi was one of these response ads as it

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promoted equal pay initiatives, and others included 84 Lumber's immigration-focused spot "The Journey Begins" and Airbnb's "We Accept" ad, which responded to the administration's proposed ban on travelers to the U.S. from several Muslim-majority nations (Audi, 2017; 84 Lumber, 2017; Airbnb, 2017). Whether these ads focused directly, indirectly, or not at all on women's rights, female characters were featured prominently in all of them and were depicted as strong and/or valuable as human beings. In early 2020, when Super Bowl LIV was broadcast, the nation was preparing for another presidential election and a new decade. Sociopolitical issues—including women's rights—became more noticeable in advertising once again. Ads in this category included Audi's previously mentioned, environmentally focused "Let It Go" spot and the NFL's own ad about racial justice titled "Inspire Change" (Audi, 2020; National Football League, 2020).

While ads containing social messages like these generally make brands appear favorable in the eyes of consumers because of the rising importance of corporate social responsibility, they are one of the two situations in which women's characterization and portrayal often become secondary and therefore hard to judge. Whether an ad's social message affects women indirectly (as it does in Microsoft's 2019 spot "We All Win," promoting accessibility for children with disabilities regardless of gender) or not at all (as in Kia's 2020 ad "Tough Never Quits," advertising the company's initiative to support homeless youth while not depicting any women), if and how women are portrayed can easily become an afterthought because the ad is promoting a different cause (Microsoft, 2019; Kia, 2020). New York Life's 2020 spot "Agape" even features a woman who is obviously sexualized, but the ad's social message about the four different types of love that society should emphasize would arguably be incomplete without that character's association with romantic love (New York Life, 2020). The other case in which judging the representation of female characters becomes especially difficult is when the ad depicts a semi-realistic but obviously ridiculous/humorous situation, such as Mint Mobile's 2019 spot "Chunky Style Milk" or Bud Light's 2021 ad "Last Year's Lemons" (Mint Mobile, 2019; Bud Light, 2021). In these ads, the incorporation of a shocking element (like the existence of a disgusting dairy product or lemons falling from the sky) into a setting very much like the real world again takes the focus off the characters, female or not.

## V. Conclusion

Overall, the portrayal of women in Super Bowl ads from 2016–2021 is much more complicated than the originally proposed framework of gender stereotyping, sexualization, or empowerment. Over time, the definitions and use of each of those terms has changed based on trends in society. Women are less often stereotyped in domestic roles and more often depicted doing other typically female activities (e.g., dancing, dress shopping) or interacting with men in flirtatious ways. Additionally, some women fit into more than one category (e.g., stereotyped in their deference to men as well as made into a sex object, or choosing to use their sexuality as a form of empowerment) or none at all. In addition, the incorporation of uplifting social messages or shock factors can easily remove focus from female characters in an ad. While women's portrayal is more difficult to categorize in either of these situations, both speak volumes about the similarly useful appeals of positive causes and an element of surprise in overall advertising trends.

While this study may help to provide some answers about where the representation of women in Super Bowl ads stands today and how it could improve, it also raises questions for further study about whether and how each of the trends above will continue. Analyzing women's portrayals in the ads that will be aired during future Super Bowls, or comparing Super Bowl ads across multiple decades (e.g., the 2000s to the 2010s to the 2020s), are two natural directions for these future studies. However, research opportunities also exist in comparing ads across media (e.g., comparing a company's Super Bowl spot to its Google and Facebook ads that year) or examining ads released during other sporting events with different audiences (e.g., March Madness, the World Series, or the Olympics).

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the timing of the research and writing of the article was limited to a three-month semester of undergraduate study. Therefore, each of the ads could only be watched once, and re-watching the ads could provide further insight and clarify lingering questions. Additionally, only one researcher watched and analyzed the ads, again due to time constraints, and a second viewer could have provided a different perspective for comparison. The researcher also had previous knowledge of some, but not all the ads from having seen them on television in passing, amplifying the potential for personal bias. However, factoring in all these limitations, this study can still serve as a bridge

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between past and future research about women's roles in advertising from a societal perspective.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lecturer Laura Lacy for her guidance throughout the entire research process, from choosing a topic to detailing the research methods to revising the manuscript. I would also like to express gratitude to everyone who provided feedback on this article throughout the writing process, particularly Josie Malone and JoyceLyn Bentley. Finally, I would like to thank the Professional Writing and Rhetoric major at Elon for emphasizing research writing in its curriculum, thereby preparing me further to conduct this study.

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