Confident appearing: Revisiting *Gender Advertisements* in contemporary culture

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is now more than 40 years since Erving Goffman published his landmark study *Gender Advertisements* (1979), which changed the way that questions of power and identity in advertising were understood. Goffman broke with traditional content analytic approaches to analysing images and instead developed a framework for examining the way that non-verbal signals communicate messages about gendered power. Working with a largely print-based sample of adverts, he argued that features such as relative size, posture and touch conveyed important messages about social value and authority. For example, relative to men, women were typically presented as smaller, lower and adopting deferential or ‘canting’ postures. Moreover, whilst men were shown using the products they advertised – and hence their touch was coded as ‘functional’- women were frequently depicted in a dreamy far-away kind of ‘licensed withdrawal’. Far from being idiosyncratic, Goffman argued, such representations were highly patterned and deeply connected to unequal gendered power relations. Indeed they operated symbolically as a kind of ritualisation of female subordination.

Goffman’s work has become a reference point for almost all subsequent scholars interested in gender and visual language, including those in linguistics, semiotics and the developing field of multi-modal analysis. His analyses had the force of an instant ‘recognition factor’, along with vivid examples, and, once apprehended, these patterns of visual domination could
readily be observed to be widespread across consumer culture. Yet Goffman was writing in a particular place and time – he was engaging with the habitat of images that defined 1970s North America. How relevant are his analyses today? To what extent do the patterns of ritualised gender subordination he discussed still apply? How might his approach be deployed in contemporary culture to ‘notice’ – analytically and politically – other gendered patterns?

In this chapter we address these questions in a critical appreciation of Goffman’s work. Drawing on a sample of 200 advertisements (‘adverts’) placed in upmarket women’s magazines we examine whether his claims still hold true, questioning his arguments about size, posture, touch and gaze, and raising new questions about how gender is ‘done’ and communicated today. While there are still many examples of adverts that adopt conventions that Goffman would recognize, the visual landscape of gender is changing, we suggest, in the wake of increasingly well-documented shifts to what is variously understood as postfeminism, commodity feminism or neoliberal feminism, in which feminist ideas are at least partially taken into account, albeit in a manner that fits comfortably with neoliberal capitalism. Our focus here is on one particular iteration of this – the figure of the ‘confident woman’, who, rather than being presented as small, passive or deferential, is depicted as bold and powerful. Drawing on a wider literature in gender studies we seek to interrogate the focus upon confident appearing, asking how – i.e. by what visual and textual means – it is produced, what it communicates and what it does ideologically and performatively. The paper’s aims are thus three-fold: to critically engage in debates about how gender materializes in contemporary advertising; to examine a novel but increasingly dominant trope for the representation of (some) women, locating this in debates about new femininities; and to contribute both theoretically and methodologically to analyzing the vocabularies of gender in use in visual culture.
GENDER AND ADVERTISING

Advertising has long been a focus of feminist analysis. One reason for this is the sheer volume of adverts in contemporary culture. As long ago as 2000, it was estimated that the average North American sees approximately 3000 advertising messages every day (Kilbourne, 2000) or, to put it another way, spends around three years in an average lifespan engaging with this material. Such figures represent a substantial under-estimate today where adverts greet us from every conceivable platform and where their ubiquity signals a blurring – if not a complete breakdown – of the boundaries between advertising and other media. In our ‘promotional culture’ (Wernick, 1991) and world of 360 degree branding, commercial content has ‘gone native’, seamlessly blurring into editorial content in magazines and newspapers, listicles on Buzz Feed, tweets, vines and blog posts ‘that never mention their corporate connections’ – in what Einstein (2016) calls ‘black ops advertising’. Advertising is viral, heavily watched as entertainment via YouTube videos, is endlessly discussed and spoofed, or may not even be recognized as a commercial message – as when the drink company, Red Bull, set up a space dive that was reported as news.

The influence of advertising has been compared to that of education and organized religion, a vast body of material that shapes our media and is at the heart of social existence (Jhally, 1987). However, it is not simply its ubiquitous nature that has generated feminist interest: adverts have also garnered critique because of their reliance upon gender ideologies (Jhally, 1987): their condensed nature makes them sites of crude stereotypes and some of the most egregious examples of sexism in media culture. They are also the locus of new meanings and figurations of gender – deeply implicated in constructions of the ‘new man’ and ‘new father’, for example, and in contemporary representations of trans and non-binary genders, as well as
in popularising distinctively postfeminist depictions of women as active, empowered sexual subjects (as we discuss below).

Early research on gender and advertising used a quantitative content analytic approach. This involves coding, then counting, instances of particular portrayals – for example whether women were portrayed as working outside the home, where they were depicted, whether they spoke, etc. A major study published in the New York Times magazine in 1972 (Hennessee & Nicholson) analysed 1200 commercials on US television and found that in half of these, women were portrayed as ‘household functionaries’ and that they were often depicted as ‘unintelligent’ and as ‘decorative objects’. Although at the time the study was criticized for methodological flaws, its results prefigured 25 years of research with very similar findings: women were predominantly shown in the home, depicted as housewives and mothers, often in subservient roles; and rarely provided argument in favour of the advertised products. By contrast men were portrayed in a wide range of settings and occupational roles; as independent and autonomous; and were presented as objective and knowledgeable about the products being advertised. Content analytic studies also examined patterns of authority, demonstrating that men did 80% to 90% of voiceovers at the time. Indeed, one study (Lovdal, 1989) found that when women’s voices were employed in adverts they were most frequently used to address babies and children, pets (particularly cats) and female dieters, rather than the population at large. Study after study documented the limited range of roles and characteristics ascribed to women in adverts – patterns that were even more pronounced when looking at particular subsets of women e.g. older women, lesbian women and women of colour.

Content analytic studies were immensely valuable in documenting striking patterns of portrayal and in furnishing quantitative evidence for arguments about sexism in advertising. However, their weaknesses included the superficiality of the analyses provided – only
focused on manifest content, not underlying ideas or ideologies – and the tendency to generate very similar findings. This was in part an artefact of the methodology itself, since in order to document instances of something (e.g. a stereotype) it has to have been pre-identified. In this sense such studies could only tell us what we already ‘knew’, supplying evidence about the extent of use of a representation rather than anything about it.

Goffman’s (1979) book – alongside emerging work in the semiotic tradition (Coward, 1984; Williamson, 1978) – interrupted this depressing litany of statistics about the preponderance of women depicted as housewives, shown only in the kitchen or bathroom, and portrayed solely for their physical attractiveness, offering a new approach grounded in an interest in non-verbal communication. According to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective individuals are constantly and routinely putting on a performance in public space to convey culturally distinctive information, which allows strangers a glimpse of their lives. Goffman called these performances displays: ‘(…) all of an individual’s behaviour and appearance informs those who witness him[sic], minimally telling them something about his social identity, about his mood, intent, and expectations, and about the state of his relation to them' (1979, p. 1). As displays become well established in a particular sequence, they can be taken out of the original context and ‘quoted’ in the 'make-believe scenes in advertisements’. Advertisers are thus able 'to use a few models and props to evoke a lifelike scene' (Goffman, 1979, pp. 3, 23). Advertisements are carefully choreographed, thereby providing a heightened, aspirational version of reality grounded in a broad cultural context. Thus, the representation of identity in print advertisement can be considered a rich source of data for social analysis of the performance of gender.

In Gender Advertisements (1979), Goffman explores the depiction of women primarily in print advertising from a fresh perspective offering insights on taken-for-granted gender codes based on his understanding of display, i.e. an individual’s non-verbal behaviour (body
language) and appearance. His analysis of gender display focuses on and reveals gender role stereotyping as well as patterns of submission. He argued that adverts frequently depict ritualized versions of the parent-child relationship, in which women are largely accorded childlike status. In the adverts he analysed, women were typically shown lower or smaller than men and using gestures that ‘ritualised their subordination’, for example lying down, using bashful knee bends, and deferential postures and smiles. Women were also often depicted in licensed withdrawal (dreamy self-absorption), as well as frequently being shown looking into mirrors, which further conveyed a message about female narcissism. Clear differences in gendered touch were also identified. While men’s touch was functional and instrumental, women’s was light and caressing, often having no purpose at all. As Gill (2007a, p. 80) has argued elsewhere, this key difference can be seen vividly in adverts for shower gel: men would be shown at lathering up busily, while women were – and arguably still are – routinely depicted ‘making only a small circular movement on one shoulder’. Similarly, women were shown touching themselves frequently, particularly on the face, and were also depicted running their fingers gently along a range of products from perfume bottles to sanitary pads.

**READING GOFFMAN: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION**

Goffman's genius lay in framing the reader's perception of gender display in advertising in skilfully chosen samples of mainly print advertisements. He was diffident about quantifying his insights. He acknowledged freely that in terms of the methodological question of 'discovery, presentation, and proof' (Goffman, 1979, p. 24), he only addresses the first two. Yet 'his observations were extremely insightful and full of resonance for most readers' (Bruce & Yearly, 2006, p. 126). A 'shock of recognition' (Manning & Smith, 2010) testifies to the relevance of his findings. Guided by Goffman's observations, the reader performs an
'instructed reading' (Smith, 1996), scrutinising the visual evidence provided in the form of pictures which visually corroborate Goffman's written descriptions of the underlying pattern.

Nearly 40 years after its publication, the book remains central to studies of gender in advertising. Goffman's analytic framework is a point of departure for the analysis of gender stereotypes (Alexander, 1994; An & Kim, 2007; Artz & Venkatesh, 1991; Bell & Milic, 2002; Butkowski & Tajima, 2017; Jones, 1991; Kuipers, van der Laan, & Arfini, 2016; Lindner, 2004; Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998; Wiles, Wiles, & Tjernlund, 1995). Moreover his work has been developed by many other writers to examine the body’s presentation in advertising. One of the major insights of subsequent feminist work has centred on how ‘cropping’ is used in adverts. Many studies have highlighted the way in which women’s – and now increasingly men’s – bodies are fragmented in adverts, visually dissected so that the viewer sees only the lips, the breasts, the bottom, etc. Kilbourne (1999, p. 278) compellingly argues that this works as a strategy of objectification, and that ‘turning a human being into a thing, an object, is almost always the first step towards justifying violence against that person’. Cortese (1999) further extended Goffman’s ideas by documenting examples of what he calls the display of ‘mock assault’ in adverts, such as an advert for a Karl Lagerfeld perfume in which a frightened looking, sexy woman is portrayed backed against a wall, while a large, muscular man (seen only from behind) bears down on her. Similar examples remain abundant, particularly in a context in which advertisers have to use ever-more visually arresting imagery in order to stand out in a crowded mediascape.

But are Goffman’s arguments still relevant today? After decades of feminist activism and large-scale social transformation to what extent are these patterns of ritualized subordination of women still evident in advertising? Meta studies (i.e. studies about other studies) have produced contradictory findings (Eisend, 2010; Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005; Wolin, 2003). Goffman's framework is not easy to operationalise and his categories are not
necessarily mutually exclusive or exhaustive (Smith, 1996). However, two studies (Belknap & Leonard, 1991; Kang, 1997) set out to conduct a conceptual replication of Goffman's work applying his precise framework. The studies analysed 1000 images in 1985, and 500 (approx 250 in 1971 and 250 in 1991) advertisements respectively. Both found continued evidence of the feminine touch, ritualisation of subordination as well as a degree of licensed withdrawal while relative size and function ranking were infrequent.

**FORTY YEARS ON**

Our own research, conducted in 2015, analyses 200 adverts in the upmarket glossy magazines Vogue (US and UK editions) and Vanity Fair (UK edition). It takes as point of departure a grounded theory approach, developed from the work of Glaser & Strauss (1967), which offers a rigorous inductive approach to building theory from data. In our research we sought to identify the basic units of non-verbal behaviour in six main categories. These are gaze, posture, gesture, touch, facial expression and proxemics, that is, the culturally determined ‘invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual that defines that individual’s preferred distance from others’ (Griffin, 2012, p. 105). It explores their constituent parts as components of visual meaning-making.

Before presenting our findings it is important to make some methodological observations on developing building blocks of meaning-making in visual language. What becomes abundantly clear from an analysis of this type, is the difficulty of deriving meaning from isolated units of body language in complex social situations. Context is everything. For instance, contradictory results have been found in interpreting the smile. Less powerful individuals have been found to both smile more and to smile less - in order to please others,
reduce threat by gathering information or indicate role conformity in the absence of social control and status (for excellent detailed analysis see Hall, et al., 2005, p. 901).

Clearly, in advertisements the genre itself also limits the number of meaningful interpretations of a smile, as one would expect it to indicate pleasure or delight regarding the advertised object. Interestingly, the smile is the most frequent facial expression in our sample, but only presents in just over ten percent of the adverts, while in most images there is a neutral facial expression. When a smile does present, it is cued by proximal indicators that express happiness as well as interest and liking in social encounters. Interestingly, only one image of the 200 presented a facial expression that was not a smile, namely a frown. In the absence of contextual information, it is not possible to assign meaning to it - it might be tiredness or irritation. In other words, facial expression is only readable in the context of other cues.

Individual units of meaning-making in isolation are polysemic, that is they can be interpreted in multiple different ways. Building blocks of visual meaning such as intimate physical proximity and bodily contact can signal a close personal relationship. However, this reading is only valid in conjunction with a cluster of other key units of meaning-making such as body orientation towards the other, a leaning forward posture and, frequently, mutual gaze and friendly facial expression as well as contextual variables. For example, an intense intimate relationship between a woman and a girl in a Patek Philippe advertisement, is cued by mutual gaze, smile, body orientation towards one another, leaning forward, intimate physical proximity and touch.

The relationship between the actors may thus be read as mother and daughter based on the socio-psychological notion of a script, frame, or schema, all of which describe 'structures of expectation based on past experience' which 'help us process and comprehend stories [and]
serve to filter and shape perception' (Tannen, 1984, p. 179). However, intimate physical proximity and bodily contact in a different context, such as a crowded urban environment, reveal no such meaning, but can be observed among strangers as for example in the Rush Hour Commute or Afternoon Sun (Figure 1) execution of the Miu Miu Eyewear Subjective Reality campaign.

Figure 1 Miu Miu Subjective Reality Afternoon Sun (Vogue, UK, 2015) Image Courtesy of the Advertising Archives

In this context, the cluster is made up of variables dissonant with a close personal relationship, namely, lack of eye contact, neutral facial expression, and body orientation away from another.

Our sample does not confirm Goffman’s analysis in terms of height, relative size, gendered postures or canting (deferential) positions, though it does point to some persistence of a particular form of ‘feminine touch’ – light, caressing and frequently directed at the self.

There are no incidences of function ranking as none of the images show one person
instructing or serving another, superior roles or even professional / working environments as indicators of the ritualisation of subordination. Nor are there incidences of licensed withdrawal, a dreamy self-absorption. The direct gaze in most images levied at the viewer, the confident stance or gait, heads held up high, give the women in the advertisements a strong presence and signal confidence: 'holding the body erect and the head high is stereotypically a mark of unashamedness, superiority, and disdain' (Goffman, 1979, p. 40). This is the case in almost all of the advertisements. In fact, the women might even be almost naked, as for example in the YSL Rouge Pur Couture advertisement where the female model Cara Delevigne is only partially covered by a jacket, yet her relaxed posture, head held high, line of sight looking down on the viewer, signal unashamedness, superiority and disdain.

One exception to this bold, confident representation of women might be the Gucci 2015/16 'Cruise' campaign (Figure 2) which appears to show a social setting in grand interiors. However, the avoidance of eye contact and the overall stiff body language of all the female actors makes them appear like puppets rather than humans. This suggests an edgy, 'arty' set of meanings.
The visuals Goffman analysed revealed a ritualisation of subordination which was partly effected via height relationships: 'A classic stereotype of deference is that of lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration.' (Goffman, 1979, p. 40) [...] elevation seems to be employed indicatively in our society, high physical place symbolizing high social place” (Goffman, 1979, p. 43). However in our sample, relative size (height relationships) was not relevant as there were few advertisements that pictured both men and women. When advertisements featured a diversity of genders men were taller than women only in as far as men typically have a greater body height than women such as in the group portraits of the Dolce &Gabbana #DG Mamma, the Miu Miu Subjective Reality campaigns and a Moncler and Kate Spade advertisements. Their placing and the hold of their bodies did not accentuate this. Indeed it is more frequently the man rather than the woman who physically lowers himself. In a Gucci advertisement, cropped so that one can only see the upper bodies, a man with a naked torso is lying on a bed, while a fully dressed woman is leaning in, her arm
resting across his body, inverting what might be expected from Goffman’s analysis (Figure 3).

Likewise in a Tiffany advertisement, a woman is lying on a sofa on her stomach, her head propped up resting on her hand, but the man is positioned lower, sitting on the floor, his back leaning against the sofa - in a room that appears to be a study (connoted through a back wall covered with books). Both are laughing as if sharing a joke. On the left hand side of the double page spread a diamond engagement ring and wedding ring are depicted with the words

Will you let me be the guy you drink bourbon with and the guy you throw great parties with, even when we don't invite anyone? Especially, when we don't invite anyone?

Will you?
The enlarged font of the words, 'Will you?' creates ambiguity, especially before the reader looks at the smaller words, suggesting a marriage proposal. Both the nonverbal and the verbal message cue us to read this as an equal relationship between a man and woman, and possibly one where she is the dominant partner.

This trend is reflected across our data set in which, overall, rather than appearing small, passive or deferential, women are presented as bold, confident and powerful, with strong and assertive patterns of looking. We want to argue that a new kind of visual language is being developed to address (particularly, though not exclusively) middle and upper class female subjects. These women are being hailed through a composite of signifiers of assertiveness, boldness and power that together comprise a kind of confident appearing. It is to this that we turn in the remainder of this paper, first locating this new figure in debates about postfeminism, new femininities and confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2015), and then in the next section examining examples in contemporary advertising.

ADVERTISING AND POSTFEMINISM

Since the 1990s a number of different writers have sought to make sense of changing constructions of gender in advertising, with a significant body of scholarship interested in exploring the impact that feminism has had on advertising. Goldman (1992/2000) coined the term ‘commodity feminism’ to refer to the way that advertising has sought to harness and appropriate the cultural power of feminism, while neutering its critique of media. From this perspective, advertising can be thought of as simultaneously using, incorporating, revising, attacking and depoliticizing feminism. Feminism may be presented as a ‘style’ or used as a branding strategy. Ideas about – for example – bodily autonomy or reproductive rights can be
emptied of their political significance and sold back to us as things to consume. As Susan Douglas put it:

> [A]dvertising agencies had figured out how to make feminism -- and anti-feminism -- work for them [...] the appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric by Revlon, Lancome and other major corporations was nothing short of spectacular. Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires (1994, pp. 247-248)

Relatedly, advertising often seeks to make a suture or articulation between feminist ideas and more traditional versions of femininity. Lazar’s (2006, p. 505) work has been valuable in exploring what she calls ‘power femininity’ – a ‘subject effect’ (Butler, 1990) of popular (post) feminism ‘which incorporates signifiers of emancipation and empowerment as well as circulates the assumptions that feminist struggles have ended… full equality has been achieved and that women of today can “have it all”’. Her recent analyses of advertising (M.M. Lazar, 2017) have centred on the presentation of femininity as labour which must nonetheless be presented as freely chosen, playful and fun. In these tropes, feminist critiques of power are repudiated and an imaginary feminism is indicted as ‘censorious’, ‘uptight’ and ‘old school’ and set against the empowered, pleasurable feminine subjectivities on offer in advertising.

Angela McRobbie’s (2009) important research on the ‘aftermath of feminism’ develops a similar line of argument, exploring the entanglement of feminist ideas with other ideas and practices, including commercially produced femininities. In turn, Gill and Scharff’s (2011) book New Femininities examines the way a postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility offers up novel constructions of gender, structured by notions of agency and entrepreneurship.

All this research contributes to an understanding of the distinctive form of ‘confident appearing’ we have identified in contemporary advertising. Two other developments are also illuminating. One is the shift, discussed by Gill (2003, 2007b, 2008) towards tropes of
empowerment in advertising targeted at women, in which women are invited to purchase everything from sanitary protection to coffee as signs of their power and independence (from men). This kind of advertising has four themes: ‘an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment’ (2008, p. 41).

What is key for our argument here is the way that this shift contributes to the depiction of a new independent female subject who is presented as playful and in control. Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today women are presented as active desiring sexual subjects. Bra advertising was a key site of this shift, moving dramatically from earnest discussions of the hold and firmness of girdles and from constructions in which women were depicted as wrapped in lingerie as a gift for men, to a novel feisty tone from the mid-1990s onwards. For example, model Eva Herzigova, clad in a push-up bra, hailed us provocatively with the slogan ‘Or are you just pleased to see me?’ – leaving out the punchline of this famous Mae West quotation for viewers to fill in themselves. This was no passive, objectified sex object, but a woman who was knowingly playing with her sexual power. Similarly, the confident, assertive tone of a Triumph bra advert from the same period is quite different from most earlier representations: 'New hair, new look, new bra. And if he doesn't like it, new boyfriend'. Following suit, other ads stressed women’s independence from men (‘If he’s late you can always start without him’) and their power (‘I pull the strings’). While there were numerous problematic features of this trend within advertising – their heterosexual exclusiveness, the emphasis upon the ‘perfect’ desirable body as women’s source of power – they were distinctive in instantiating a new more assertive vocabulary in advertising that is a crucial part of the genealogy of what we call ‘confident appearing’
Another key trend central to the emerging modality of ‘confident appearing’ is the rise of what has become known as Love Your Body (LYB) advertising. This exhorts women to get ‘comfortable in their own skin’, to ‘believe in yourself’ and materialises with taglines such as ‘You are more beautiful than you think’ (Dove) or ‘Awaken your incredible’ (Weight Watchers). LYB discourses are, in part, a response to feminist anger at what has been seen by many as unrealistic and harmful images of female beauty, and as such, join the list of ways in which the advertising industry has been forced to adapt. They interrupt the almost entirely normalised hostile judgement of women’s bodies, with more positive and celebratory messages focused upon forging links between body confidence, self-esteem and the products being advertised.

While the mediated public sphere is full of posts testifying to women’s relief and joy at these messages, including the emotional power of being encouraged – for once – to feel okay about themselves (Lynch, 2011), there is also a growing critical literature that questions the supposedly benign ideas upon which it rests (Banet-Weiser, 2014; Murphy, 2013; Rodrigues, 2012). Critics have pointed to a variety of problems with LYB be advertising. These include the ‘fakeness’ of the LYB visual regime. Many of the companies adopting the iconography of ‘natural’, ‘real’ women and passing it off as ‘authentic’ have been exposed for using precisely the techniques they claim to reject: photoshop, make up, professional models, etc. The claimed diversity of the images has also been interrogated. Do they really depart from most other advertising in terms of showing different ages, ethnicities, body sizes? Moreover, the adverts have been accused of ‘re-citing’ hate speech e.g. endlessly circulating fat-phobic discourses in the apparent interest of shutting down ‘fat talk’ (Special K), and of effacing their own complicity with precisely the negative discourses they claim to reject. What is striking for our argument here, however, is to note the way that these adverts have evolved a distinctive visual language for representing the ‘natural’ female body, with a simple, pared-
back aesthetic look, as well as a bold and defiant language centred on self-esteem as a route to beauty. This can be seen to feed directly into the forms of confident appearing we have identified.

CONFIDENT APPEARING

In the visual regime we dub ‘confident appearing’ the elements of LYB have disseminated beyond bodily appearance to construct a new female subject for whom confidence is central. This can be seen across popular culture directed at women: women’s magazines publish confidence issues, smartphone apps promote ongoing confidence programs, and policymakers talking about gender inequality highlight a female ‘confidence deficit’ as a central problem in equalizing gender pay and status. As Gill and Orgad (2015) have argued, confidence has emerged in the second decade of the 21st century as a gendered ‘technology of self’ (Foucault, 1988) calling on women to act upon themselves to refashion their subjectivity around ideas of self-belief. Confidence operates across multiple domains from body love to international development and from workplace to finance, and is increasingly diffused across social life.

A growing body of work examines the ‘confidence cult’ (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 2017; Favaro, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2017; Wood, 2017) as well as related formations such as the ‘happiness industry ‘(Binkley, 2014; Davies, 2015), ‘state of esteem’ or ‘wellness’ syndrome (Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015). What this work has not examined, however, is the way these notions materialize not simply as discourses or ideologies evident in language, but also as particular visual regimes. It is this that we look at here, since it is highly evident in our sample of adverts in which, rather than appearing to be subordinated, women seemed to be bold and confident actors.
The visual elements of this mode of confident appearing involve several repeated features: head held high, face turned forward, eyes meeting the gaze of the viewer and looking directly back at her or him. Smiling is rare, and sometimes the gaze has an almost defiant aspect. These visual motifs are underpinned by linguistic elements, which highlight female independence, empowerment, self-belief and entitlement. A good example is Clinique’s advert for soap, clarifying lotion and moisturizer.

Using the face of US feminist, Tavi Gevinson, known for founding the feminist blog Rookie while a teenager, the advert declares ‘FACE FORWARD’. Facing forward, like ‘facing the world’, is a synonym for confidence. Gevinson’s visage, made up in a naturalistic style, with her hair swept away from her face and tucked behind her ears, exemplifies this idea: her ‘bare’ face looks straight at us with a neutral expression. The confidence message is underscored by the written text which declares

‘Dress for yourself. Dream big. Find your voice. Put it out there’

These imperatives express autonomy, boldness, empowerment, engagement or taking on the world. They encode what Dobson (2014) has called a kind of ‘performative shamelessness’ and what Gill and Kanai (2018) dub ‘hollow defiance’. Like other ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1983) circulating in contemporary culture they offer powerful messages of hope and possibility, wrapped in an upbeat and vaguely defiant sense of self-belief – whose argumentative target is never specified (i.e. What or who it is that stops you – without Clinique’s help – from dreaming big or finding your voice?) They sell us a kind of ‘feminist feeling’ (Gill & Orgad, 2017), but one that is devoid of political thinking and action.

Other tropes in the visual construction of ‘confident appearing’ involve control or movement, for example with the figure of the woman striding confidently forward through an urban landscape. In such representations the stride is typically exaggerated – much longer than is
actually typical of walking – to highlight a sense of a forward-moving woman. An example found at the time of writing this is an advert for Geox (Respira) shoes in which a woman is depicted striding out, her hands in her trouser pockets, her head held high. M&S also use this motif in a 2017 campaign, the woman’s hair blowing behind her to signify the speed and purposefulness of her gait, underpinned by the copy ‘Always walk tall, even in flats’. Swatch uses a different motif of movement – this time a highly controlled acrobatic dance move, that mimics the shape of the watch, several times life size, around the woman’s body. The slogan declares ‘YOUR MOVE’.

What we see, then, across our corpus is evidence of the way that a distinctive visual language is being developed for depicting female self-confidence – in ways that break markedly from Goffman’s analysis. This is underscored by a multiplicity of commercial confidence messages which exhort: ‘Confidence is the new sexy’ (Bobbi Brown), ‘Take control’ (Braun), ‘Command style’ (Great Lengths) or ‘Feel confident everyday’ (Charles Worthington). In the latter the confidence message is hardly lessened by the inclusion, in much smaller font, of the phrase ‘washing your hair’ between ‘feel confident’ and ‘everyday’. Confident appearing has become a central and recognizable trope in contemporary advertising to women, and demands further analysis.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have revisited the important work of Goffman, which offered a compelling way of analyzing the visual language of gender in advertisements. Using a sample of 200 adverts taken from Vogue and Vanity Fair we systematically examined whether Goffman’s arguments still hold true, 40 years on. Our analysis showed marked disjunctures from Goffman’s account of the ritualized subordination of women in advertising. Indeed, looking
across a range of features of his analysis, little evidence was found of function ranking, height marking or lower placing, canting or deferential postures. ‘Licensed withdrawal’ was rarely present, and women were rarely shown smiling or in any other way implying lower status. Indeed, only the sharp differentiations in touch that Goffman identified were to be seen clearly in our sample.

What was evident, however, was what appeared to be a new visual trope for representing women: one that we have named ‘confident appearing’. In this women are depicted with their heads held high, looking directly at the viewer, with a neutral expression, or pictured striding purposefully forward, or holding themselves in controlled movement. We have shown how this has become an established visual motif for representing women, and one that is underpinned by written texts that exhort confidence, self-belief and empowerment. In our analysis we have sought to locate this in a broader understanding of the way in which advertising has responded to and engaged with feminism. It seems to have become a way for advertisers to appropriate some of the meanings and contemporary cultural power of feminism, while locating it in individualized expressions of self-belief and entitlement rather than calls for social transformation. In this way a vague sense of feminist defiance can be appropriated, yet emptied out of its political force. Confident appearing has become a key trope for enacting this.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

One limitation of the analysis presented here is the clear class bias of the magazines we examined. They are targeted at an upper class and upper middle class readership of women, assumed to be in executive or professional positions, or to be married to wealthy men. The brands advertised are upmarket and aspirational, and the adverts themselves have very high
production values connoting wealth and exclusivity. Perhaps our general findings about Goffman’s work may not be replicated in media targeted at a different class demographic. This remains a task for future research to examine. However, the figure of the confident woman whom we have identified as a key feature of advertising targeted at women does indeed extend beyond the wealthy demographic addressed by Vogue and Vanity Fair. It can be seen in adverts by high street brands such as M&S, Boots, and Braun. Confident appearing, we suggest, is a widespread representational practice that cuts across class, race, age and sexuality, and it has become a key way that advertisers express a lite, individualized version of feminism, while offering little challenge to a wider, patriarchal capitalist culture. Documenting these ideological shifts—which operate at both visual and discursive levels—remains important work for feminist analysts.

FURTHER READING


In Empowered Banet-Weiser explores the relationship between popular feminism and misogyny in advertising, online and multi-media platforms, and nonprofit and commercial campaigns. Investigating feminist discourses that emphasize self-confidence, body positivity, and individual achievement alongside violent misogynist phenomena such as revenge porn, toxic geek masculinity, and men's rights movements, the author traces how popular feminism and popular misogyny are co-constituted.

Aesthetic Labour considers questions about gender and the politics of appearance from a new perspective by developing the notion of aesthetic labour. Bringing together feminist writing regarding the ‘beauty myth’ with recent scholarship about new forms of work, the authors suggest that in this moment of ubiquitous photography, social media, and 360 degree surveillance, women are increasingly required to be ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’, maintaining a constant state of vigilance about their appearance.


Hall offers a comprehensive outline of how visual images, language and discourse work as `systems of representation’. Individual chapters explore: representation as a signifying practice in diverse social contexts and institutional sites; the use of photography in the construction of national identity and culture; other cultures in ethnographic museums; fantasies of the racialized `Other' in popular media, film and image; the construction of masculine.


Confidence Cult explores how confidence has become a 'technology of self' that invites girls and women to work on themselves. It demonstrates the extensiveness of what Orgad and Gill call the ‘cult(ure) of confidence’ across different areas of social life, identities in discourses of consumer culture and advertising; and the gendering of narratives in television soap operas.

Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials is a critical guide to the study and analysis of visual culture which examines individual methodologies in a clear and structured fashion.

**RELATED TOPICS**

Multimodal constructions of feminism (tbc)


