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# Fashion advertising, men's magazines, and sex in advertising: A critical-interpretive study

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Fashion Advertising, Men's Magazines, and Sex in Advertising:

A Critical-Interpretive Study

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## Dedication

This project has truly been a journey. I would like to thank each person who has helped me achieve this significant milestone; this paper also belongs to you. First I want to acknowledge my family (Mom, Dad, and Amber) for their endless love, encouragement, and understanding. To Tim, you have been a rock and a cheerleader; thank you for never letting me give up. In honor of my grandfather whom I lost during this process and in celebration of my grandmothers, you are all inspirations to me. To Kim, thank you so very much for pushing me beyond my own limits, always believing in me and leading me to success – you have been a mentor, friend, and inspiration. To Dr. Bell, Dr. Killebrew and the mass communications faculty, and others within the USF community, your excitement for knowledge set a fire inside of me. Thank you for passing on your passion. And, finally, to my peers, you have felt the growing pains just as I have; I could not have finished this journey without you to lean on. Thank you all again and again.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines sexualized portrayals of women in fashion advertising found in metro-sexual men's magazines as visual rhetoric. Historically, studies on sexual images of women in advertising have focused on content analyses of these images and how they affect women. This study asks how sexualized imagery of women functions rhetorically as part of a branding message designed to sell products. The exemplar advertisements were chosen specifically for their sexual imagery from an earlier study by the researcher on sexual images of women in fashion advertisements found in men's magazines.

The messages interpreted within the visuals of this study reveal a current slice of history in terms of gender and sexuality. In the case of this study the constructed "ideal" heteronormative view of gender, masculinity, femininity, and sexuality are what are for sale; they are the merchandise to be purchased. Women are present in the exemplar ads as an accessory to prove and support heterosexual masculinity through sex, as if to ward off any ideas that metro-sexual men may be anything but heterosexual.

Though we cannot generalize beyond these five magazine ads, we can think of the exemplar ads as a small sample of contemporary culture. The narratives of these ads suggest that man continues to be the prevailing figure in terms of importance and power

relative to woman, who is subordinate to man. This thesis supports prior research on women in advertising where men are more important than women, and the ads in this thesis continue to define masculinity and femininity in classic patriarchal and heterosexual terms. However, this thesis adds important critical-interpretative work through visual rhetorical analysis on advertising in men's metro-sexual magazines to a body of research that includes very little of such work.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Fashion in the media, particularly in advertising, may communicate the roles men and women play in life, how they are to look, and who they are to be as people. “Fashion, clothing, and dress are signifying practices, they are ways of generating meanings, which produce and reproduce those cultural groups along with their positions of relative power” (Barnard, 2002, p. 38). Ewen and Ewen (1992) write, “The image, the commercial, reaches out to sell more than a service or product; it sells a way of understanding the world” (p. 24). They argue that visual communication, especially through advertising, creates a cultural language, which helps shape society.

The way society views fashion, dress, and, therefore, fashion advertising, may contribute to social norms including how society views class, gender, sex, and sexuality. Fashion and clothing often portray who we are or who we desire to be, whether it is through brands, styles, or other adornments. Dress helps define social roles, and how fashion is advertised and sold is important in signifying the meaning behind the roles portrayed in the advertisements, especially gender roles.

It is important to investigate messages in fashion advertising found in men’s magazines to discover how the images work as persuasion regarding class, sexuality, gender, and, specifically, how women are being portrayed to men as consumers. This



advertising genre is also significant because fashion, and thus fashion advertising, may play a role in determining cultural views of class, women, gender, sex, and sexuality. As Thompson (2000) writes:

Advertisements showcase attitudes and ideas; the corresponding power to influence is formidable because advertising can also change values, such as those surrounding the display and meaning of the body. Nowhere is the potency of advertising more evident than in the arena of selling clothing and appearance-related commodities. (p. 178)

This study examines sexualized portrayals of women in fashion advertising found in men's magazines. While conventional advertising practice increasingly depends upon the aphorism that "sex sells," conventional mass communications research approaches to advertising containing sexual imagery have assumed that such images do affect audiences and such images portray inaccurate truths to audiences. This thesis, however, makes no claims about audience interpretations or media effects. Instead this thesis looks closely at the visual rhetoric of sexualized images of women used in fashion advertising in men's magazines to ask how sexualized imagery of women functions rhetorically as part of a branding message presumably designed to sell a product.

By treating the visual communication in "sex sells" fashion ads in men's magazines as rhetoric, this study looks at how these images work to produce persuasion. Specifically, I use the present study to build on my previous research that looked into the portrayal of women in men's fashion advertising found in men's "metro-sexual" magazines (Ford, 2006). The previous study found sexualized images of women to be a significant theme in fashion advertising targeting young men as magazine readers. This

thesis looks closely at the visual rhetoric in five exemplar ads drawn from the earlier study. The five ads studied were selected as “worst offenders” in terms of overt sexual content. The method of analysis adopts Mullen and Fisher’s (2004) visual analysis process, which Mullen and Fisher adapted from Foss’ techniques for visual rhetorical analysis (Foss, 1994; Foss & Kaengieter, 1992).

The visual rhetoric of the exemplar ads suggests that for the intended viewers, men ages 22-35, an “ideal” masculine lifestyle is attainable through the purchase of certain brands, but not necessarily specific products. These featured idyllic lifestyles suggest that a “model” masculine standard of living is signified by possessions, leisure, travel, sex, and, essentially, wealth and luxury. These characteristics are suggested by visuals of sexually aggressive women, motorcycles, hotel rooms and luggage, jewelry, and outdoor adventure. Yet, without the presence of women in the ads, such a masculine lifestyle is not necessarily signifying a *heterosexual* masculinity. I argue that the ads in this study position women as interchangeable with the advertised fashion products, accoutrements to a heterosexual masculine fantasy lifestyle. I also argue that this representation of women as a heterosexual masculine accessory functions to prove heteronormative masculinity in both a magazine genre devoted to teaching young men to care about their physical appearance through consumption and a homophobic visual culture struggling to come to terms with the reality that looks can be deceiving when it comes to assumptions about sexual orientation.

Below I first provide some background on the topic of women, advertising, and magazines. Second I position this thesis within the literature. Third I offer visual rhetoric as the framework for the study, before outlining my method. Next I analyze and then

discuss the five exemplars. Finally, I conclude by discussing the study's strengths and weaknesses, as well as direction for future work.

## Chapter Two

### Background

According to Williamson (1978), “people are made to identify themselves with what they consume” (p. 13). Thus, fashion can be considered a part of what we consume to create ourselves. Advertisements and their imagery have the ability to “show you a symbol of yourself aimed to attract your desire; they suggest that you can become the person in the picture before you” (p. 65).

For more than 150 years, products in newspapers, magazines, television, and other types of advertising have used women and sexuality as persuasive sales messaging (Reichert, 2003). During this 150-year history, magazines typically have set the tone for what the American woman is to be (Kitch, 1998). Through illustrations, short stories, advertisements, and other content, early magazines portrayed the “New Woman” in her various roles as a housewife, an outdoor active girl, a “business” woman, and a social lady. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, editors and marketers alike soon realized that women were the main audience for both general interest magazines and consumer product advertising, and that began a profitable relationship between magazine publishing and the advertising industry that focused on women (Kitch, 1998).

One of the earliest and most successful of these magazines, the *Ladies Home Journal*, became a reference for many American women on how to act and dress, as well as what products to buy for their homes. The pages of the *Journal* “featured the latest

dresses, hairstyles, decorating, and, most of all, consumer products” (Kitch, 1998, p. 246). The magazine featured outdoor-wear corsets that allowed women to obtain a “bicycle waist” as “graceful as the New Woman” and silk skirts that would be worn “by every lady who pays any claim to style” (p. 254). These advertisements did portray more freedom for the “New Woman,” but they also portrayed images of what was socially acceptable as far as women’s appearance and their social roles.

Shields and Heinecken (2002) describe changing trends in U.S. idealizations of women’s bodies in fashion across the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

the cinched-waist ideal of 1900, the flat-chested and straight bodied flapper of the 1920s, the full-chested hourglass figure of the 1950s, the skinny waif of the 1970s, the muscular, tanned breast-implanted aerobicized body of the 1980s that continues today, albeit with smaller hair. (p. xii)

These images, or trends, reveal the ways that culture idealizes women; these idealizations then become the standards by which women judge themselves and others. Such idealizations of women’s appearance also reflect a culture’s view of gender characteristics in political matters, the economy, and in the popular culture of the period. Gender roles and biases are created and idealized in magazines, as well as in television, movies, the internet, newspapers, and countless other formal and informal media channels and vehicles. Idealized notions of women’s bodies may become cultural ideals for sex appeal, even fetish. Beyond gender roles, it is important to look at the sexual roles women play in advertising, particularly fashion advertising, because sexual imagery of women is so pervasive.

Advertisements tell about our society's current, past, and possibly future culture; they also suggest how individuals in our culture choose to represent themselves (Barnard, 2002). Society takes its cues and forms its culture from a variety of sources, and individuals strive to conform to the norms set by the culture. Media images may even help shape our fashions and sexual desires because what we see in the media often becomes what we consider "normal" (Berger, 1991; Watson, 1998).

## Chapter Three

### Literature Review

The long history of women in advertising offers a reflection of cultural attitudes toward women. The advertising industry has long operated on the idea that “sex sells,” and with this idea has come the sexual objectification of women’s bodies in advertisements. However, research on the visual rhetoric of ads featuring these sexual images of women is limited to a few studies. Even less scholarship has focused specifically on fashion advertisements or on the newer men’s magazines that cater to younger men as audiences than such magazines’ predecessors. On the topic of sex in magazine advertising, the research mainly has investigated women’s magazines, with some comparisons across other genres, such as general interest and men’s magazines. Other research areas focus on the conventions of sexualizing women in magazine advertising and the frequency with which this happens. These studies suggest that the sexualization of women in advertising is increasing. Research on audience interpretations of sexual images of women in magazine advertising is quite limited. The following literature review organizes relevant scholarship topically by men’s magazines, sex in advertising, stereotyping, and audience interpretations. First, however, I discuss the socially sanctioned forms of sex and sexuality that permeate popular culture, including advertising.

## *Sex and Sexuality*

Definitions of normative gender roles and sexual practices not only define “abnormal,” “pathologic,” and “deviant” gender roles and sexual practices, but also are always implicated in social power relations and the political economy. Although most Westerners tend to think of sex and heterosexual practice as a “natural” result of human biology, normative performances of sex and sexuality—and thus what constitutes “normal” gender roles, sexuality, and sexual practice—vary widely across history and cultures (Foucault, 1978; Rubin, 1984). “Sexual essentialism” describes the belief that sex is an unchanging “natural force that exists prior to social life” (Rubin, 1984, p. 275). In recent decades a growing literature across numbers of academic disciplines argues that human understandings, performances, and cultural ideals of gender and sexual orientation do not pre-date the socio-cultural contexts in which they appear. Instead the socio-cultural political context works to produce and constrain normative sex. Notions of acceptable gender, sexuality, and varieties of sexual practices, then, are not merely “essential” and “natural” biological urges (thereby by default determining the unacceptable and un-natural). Instead they are shaped and performed by material bodies within the particular historical periods, cultures, and social orders from which they emerge.

Beyond the political consequences, this shift in thinking has important implications for social movements such as women’s, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights. Understanding sex as a fluid continuum of cultural phenomena implicated in social institutions and power structures suggests that cultural manifestations of sex, such as visual representations of women in advertising, are available for critique.



The Western-European Christian tradition from which U.S. advertising developed, privileges monogamous heterosexual relations within marriage for reproductive purposes at the top of a hierarchy of sexual normalcy. For the most part, mainstream contemporary U.S. advertising has tended to endorse this approved form of sex. Even unmarried heterosexual relations in popular media tend to be monogamous, if sometimes serially so. Unless the ads are featured in gay and lesbian media, “sex sells” content mainly has limited itself to a narrowly constructed and ideal heterosexual lifestyle (Gauntlett, 2002).

Additionally, this privileged heterosexual cultural ideal depends upon a gender hierarchy in which men are superior to women; for example, the ideal suggests that men are more socially empowered and, ironically given the so-called “natural” state of marriage, men are encouraged to be more sexually active and experienced. On the other hand, prior to the wide availability of birth control and the second wave women’s movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s, idealizations of women who were worthy of monogamous heterosexual commitment meant they had to be virginal prior to commitment and reluctantly sexually available afterwards; sexually available unmarried women, while necessary for masculine exploits, became unsuitable mates. After the second wave women’s movement, this cultural narrative adapted to include the sexually active woman, whether sexually active while still looking for a permanent mate or already committed. Indeed, one of the most persistent popular culture legacies of that period is the co-optation and recuperation of women’s social equality into a narrowed definition of women’s liberation as equivalent to a heterosexual liberation in which women are eagerly and sexually available to men. It might be argued that Western 20<sup>th</sup> century heterosexual masculinity has depended upon demonstrating gender dominance in

a variety of ways, including sexual prowess and conquest. Contemporary men's magazines offer a site for exploring how this cultural narrative fares at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Men's Magazines*

Men's magazines have grown in popularity over the last 10 years. Newcomers such as *Maxim*, *FHM*, *Stuff*, and *Details* have joined the ranks of more established titles such as *GQ (Gentleman's Quarterly)* and *Esquire*. According to the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual *Magazine Top 300 by Advertising Age* (September, 2006), men's magazines account for over \$1 billion in annual total gross advertising revenue, and since 1999, *Maxim* alone has had a consistent circulation around 2.5 million, easily surpassing most of its predecessors (Ives, 2006). This new era of men's magazines reaches out to the "sexy" man as a consumer. These magazines are not ashamed to focus on sex and sexuality, which, in turn, defines for readers what sex is for our culture (Krasses, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003). The newer men's magazines have a fashionable "metro-sexual" point of view. Metro-sexual is a fairly new term that refers to young men ages 22 to 35 who are known as "the sexy consumer...versed in gadgetry, clothing and culture" (Fine, 2005). The term "metro-sexual" has become so mainstream that it now appears in the dictionary as: "a usually urban heterosexual male given to enhancing his personal appearance by fastidious grooming, beauty treatments, and fashionable clothes" (Merriam-Webster, p. 1).

Men's magazines often have sexy content not just in their advertising but also in their editorial content. Exploring the sexual rhetoric of the editorial photography in *Maxim* and *Stuff*, Krasses, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003) concluded that the editorial

photography in both magazines “frame sex and sexual practice in limited ways that reinforce the objectification of women and privilege heterosexuality” (p. 114). *Maxim* and *Stuff* have similar content and the same publisher, Dennis Publishing. The authors note that previous research has focused on genres such as women’s magazines and general interest magazines, but little research focuses specifically on this variety of magazines. They also note that in the past when men’s magazines were included in studies, their inclusion was meant only as a comparison to other genres.

Historically there appears to be a difference in the amount of sexual content in the advertising found in men’s, women’s, and general interest titles. Reichert and Carpenter (2004) looked at sex in advertising from 1983 to 2003, using magazine genres as variables. The trend, according to the study, is toward the sexual objectification of women, with an increase in the sexualization of women in men’s magazine titles. Advertising showing nudity, suggestive dress, and intimate situations led the researchers to conclude that the women in the ads are increasingly represented as sex objects. The authors attribute part of this trend to a larger trend in men’s magazines that targets the young metro-sexual men’s market.

#### *Sex in Advertising*

The combination of advertising and sex is powerful. Past studies have found that in magazine advertising women often are shown as objects of heterosexual masculine desire. These studies often group together analyses of the different magazine genres into one research study covering a small sample of each (Baker, 2005; MacKay & Covell, 1997; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, & Zavoina, 1999). Other studies look at advertising specifically in women’s magazines (Courtney &

Lockeretz, 1971; Ewen & Ewen, 1992; Ford, LaTour, & Clarke, 2004; Kitch, 1998; Lambiase & Reichert, 2003; Lambiase & Reichert, unpublished manuscript; Lundstrum & Sciglimpaglia, 1977; Millum, 1975; Orth & Holancova, 2003; Reichert, 2003; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004; Shields & Heinecken, 2002; Wagner & Banos, 1973; Wolin, 2003). Finally, other studies have found that the majority of sexual content is found in women's and men's magazines, rather than general interest magazines (Reichert et al., 1999; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004).

Advertisers have used sex to sell products from cologne to cars. Sex is used to sell not only products but also opinions, trends, and stereotypes. In theory, sex in advertising is likely to attract attention, but it also gives sexual meaning to otherwise nonsexual products. Simply stated, conventional wisdom assumes that "sex sells," but it seems to sell much more than products. It sells a new product meaning that "resonates with the consumers in a way that will make the cash register ring" (Reichert, 2003, p. 42). These meanings may be implicit or explicit promises that the product will make the viewing consumer more sexually attractive and help one achieve one's sexual desires. Whatever meanings the products accrue from being associated with sexual imagery, such messages are most likely nothing more than fantasy.

Similarly, MTV videos, for example, sell much more than CDs, according to Jhally (1990, 1995, 2007). As the ultimate "commercial," Jhally argues that music videos sell young heterosexual men "dreamworlds" of promises and fantasies about women and sex. He shows that women featured in these fantasy landscapes are represented as nymphomaniacs who are dependent on and subservient to men. The music video, or music advertisement, has been reduced to a mere template that "relies on a narrow set of

characters and plot lines” (Earp & Gelssman, n.d., p. 1). Jhally (1990, 1995, 2007) believes that the dysfunctional portrayal of heterosexuality in music videos leads to a greater acceptance of these depictions as normal, including the tacit message that sexual violence against women is acceptable. Over time, the continued repetition of such visual messages reinforces not just gendered heterosexual stereotypes but also sexist attitudes towards women and heterosexual relationships. It is no great leap from the formulaic depiction of heterosexual masculine dream worlds in music videos to the increasing sexualization of men’s metro-sexual magazine content, since the target audience is the same for both: young adult men.

Lambiase and Reichert’s (2003) analysis of erotic rhetoric in advertising in men’s and women’s magazines describes how persuasive messages are constructed visually. The researchers, however, take a different approach to content analysis by analyzing specifically chosen exemplars as visual rhetoric. The researchers purposely chose advertisements that contained visual sexual content unrelated to the products’ characteristics or the ways consumers use such products. The authors argue that such ads offer up meanings unavailable through traditional content analysis. Lambiase and Reichert note that this kind of visual rhetorical analysis is needed in mass communication scholarship, especially in advertising, in order to understand more systematically the messages behind the visuals, instead of just a headcount of the numbers of such images. Lambiase and Reichert’s analysis of the visual rhetoric contained in their exemplars found that each “either implicitly or explicitly offers the promise of sexual benefits” (p. 253), even though none of the products could be construed as having any relationship to sex or sexual practice. While a progressive and promising research approach, Lambiase

and Reichert's work to date has not accounted for the sexual orientation of the audience or the idea that people may take pleasure from seeing people of their own gender portrayed sexually.

### *Stereotyping*

Sex sells more than just products, however. Sex role portrayals in advertising can influence fashions, trends, ideas about class, notions of ideal bodies, and even stereotypes. As defined by Perse (2001), stereotypes are "beliefs held and recognized by large groups of people" (p. 172), and Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet (1978) define sex-role stereotypes as:

Set portrayals of sex-appropriate appearance, interests, skills, behaviors, and self-perceptions. They are more stringent than guidelines in suggesting persons not conforming to the specified way of appearing, feeling, and behaving, are inadequate as males or females. (p. 5)

Gender stereotyping in advertising generally refers to social roles for women; they usually are homemakers, sex objects, or dependent and insignificant adornments of men. A landmark study by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) looked at sex-role portrayals of women in advertising during the last week in April 1970. The study found that four major gender stereotypes existed in the early 1970s advertising they studied. Using content analysis, the authors looked at 700 advertisements from eight general interest magazines that appealed to both men and women. The first stereotype found in the study suggested that women's main role is as homemaker. Second, the study found that the advertisements assumed that women do not make important decisions. Third, most

advertisements made women appear dependent on men, and, fourth and most important to the present purpose, women were portrayed primarily as “sex objects,” which the researchers defined as the decorative-only role women tend to play. Women, the researchers argue, are used for looking at only and there is no interest in the women as people (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971).

Wagner and Banos (1973) conducted follow-up research to investigate whether the advertising industry had responded to the Courtney and Lockeretz’s (1971) findings. This second study found that advertisements had begun to show women in more positive roles as reflected in the agenda of the second wave women’s movement, although the numbers of women shown in these new more positive roles were low (Wagner & Banos, 1973). Nevertheless, additional research over the next three decades shows that most stereotypes about women’s social roles still hold true (Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977; Wolin, 2003; Ford, LaTour, & Clarke, 2004; Morris, 2006). Ford, LaTour, and Clark (2004) argue that “stereotypical handling of women in advertisements may have detrimental effects on women’s self concepts as well as their achievement aspirations” (p. 46). A review of three decades of research on gender portrayals in advertising between 1970 and 2002 suggests that stereotyping has in fact decreased to a certain extent since 1970, but stereotyping has not disappeared totally (Wolin, 2003).

After Goffman’s (1976) work in *Gender Advertisements* that examined the ways women are portrayed in advertising, he expressed puzzlement as to why readers do not find advertising representations of women strange or unusual compared to everyday life. Goffman outlines the idealistic representations of gender he observed in categories such

as relative size of the models, the feminine touch, function ranking within the ad, the family culture portrayed, the ritualization of women's subordination and licensed withdrawal of women. For instance, as an elaboration on the ritualization of subordination, Goffman found women and children are more likely to be pictured on the floor or bed. He interpreted this "lowered" placement as a cultural symbol of their submission to men, who tended literally to be positioned above women in advertising, which signifies superiority. Similarly he found women were more likely to caress objects, whereas men firmly grasped them, and women were often portrayed as children or child-like compared to the men counterparts in the ads. A sociologist, Goffman (1976) concluded that these kinds of advertising representations are not normal, but idealized "illustrations of ritual-like bits of behavior which portray an ideal conception of the two sexes and their structural relationship to each other, accomplishing this in part by indicating, again ideally, the alignment of the actor in the social situation" (p. 84).

Advertising then can influence how gender stereotypes continue to be formed and reinforced. Jhally (2007) writes that "gender identity is constructed in part through social representations of which the most pervasive and powerful form in the consumer society are those associated with advertising" (p. 4). He calls these representations "hyper-ritualistic images," which offer extremely concentrated messages about gender and sex (p. 7). However, research on how audiences actually interpret these messages about gender, sex, and sexuality is limited.



### *Audience Interpretations*

Some audience reception studies indicate that consumers are aware of the stereotypical gender images found in magazine advertising (Ford, LaTour, & Clarke, 2004; Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977). Gender, defined by Wolin (2003), is “the social and cultural meanings associated with the maleness and femaleness imposed and expected by society” (p. 111). Wolin writes that “both male and female gender role attitudes can be influenced by the media” (p. 117).

A 2003 survey by Orth and Holancova measuring the attitudes of 320 adults (161 women and 159 men) on gender roles in advertising found that embedded consumer prejudices invited different reactions and emotions from consumers toward the gender roles represented in the treatment ads (Orth & Holancova, 2003). The survey’s researchers argue that the public expects women and men to behave and look in certain ways depending on established beliefs; thus, stereotyping occurs both in the ways that advertisers construct their messages and in the ways that consumers bring their life experiences and points of view to interpreting the same messages. As Condit (1989) has demonstrated, the notion of polysemous texts open to multiple audience interpretations may be attributing an overly optimistic agency to audiences who do not necessarily have the cultural equipment to produce critical or resistant readings of mediated messages.

To summarize, there has been extensive research on magazine advertising, women in advertising, and even sex in advertising. Much of this scholarship focuses on women’s magazines, on the means used to turn women into sex objects in magazine advertising, and on the numbers of advertisements that do so. A much more limited literature on audience reception attempts to account for consumers’ interpretations of

sexual images of women in magazine advertising, but a thinness of data prevent generalizations beyond the assumption that audiences do not always interpret messages in the ways they are intended. As to progressive changes among advertising practices since the second wave women's movement, results are mixed. The representation of status roles for women in magazine advertising has increased somewhat. But so has the sexual objectification of women's bodies. Research on the visual rhetoric of ads featuring sexual images of women is restricted to a few studies. However these studies raise questions about the limits of traditional social science methods, both quantitative and qualitative, for studying the rhetorical functions of advertising or the multiple meanings available for interpretation in advertising that brand non-sex-related products with heteronormative stereotypes about women as objects of men's sexual desire. Research focusing specifically on the newer young men's magazines is also scarce, as is research on fashion advertising in such magazines.

Overall it appears traditional mass communications research has focused on the inaccurate and unfair portrayal of women in advertising and the assumption that such images do have an effect on audiences. This thesis asks how sexualized images of women in men's magazines advertisements are constructed visually and how these visual constructions function rhetorically. This is an area that few researchers other than Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase have studied.

## Chapter Four

### Theoretical Framework

Visual rhetoric is well suited for evaluating the sexual imagery in men's magazine fashion advertisements because it can be used to understand how these images are constructed as a means of persuasion. Some argue that visual communication is necessary in today's marketing communications mix, and visual elements are more than just mere objects for the eye to look upon (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996, 1999). The visual component is "essential, intricate, meaningful, and culturally embedded" in today's advertising and promotions (1999, p. 51).

#### *Visual Rhetoric*

Visual rhetoric is the study of how visual information is used in communication or persuasion. The definition of visual rhetoric can be explained as using a visual cue, be it text, symbol, photo, or other mark, to stimulate the viewer into taking action (Burke, 1969; Kenney & Scott, 2003). Theories of visual rhetoric allow researchers and scholars to make sense of and critique visual information. Those using visual rhetorical approaches are interested in symbols as forms of communication. These symbols may be magazine advertisements, television commercials, or other mass media images (Foss, 2005).

This study builds on the work of Lambiase and Reichert (2003), who have studied sexual images in advertising. Using visual rhetoric, they argue that visual cues in

advertising offer promises “both implicitly and explicitly through words and images” (p. 248). Their work on erotic rhetoric in advertising examines how images and layout are related to the message being conveyed; however, erotic images rarely have anything to do with the products being sold. The idea of “sex sells” often means it sells the imaginary promise of sex; visuals suggest to viewers that using the product will give the consumer access to sexual gratification (Lambiase & Reichert, 2003).

Advertising is interpreted through its visual rhetoric and has its own visual language with which the advertisements may communicate meanings and social standards (McLuhan, 1964; Scott, 1994). According to Scott (1994):

The sender, therefore, crafts the message in anticipation of the audience’s probable response, using shared knowledge of various vocabularies and conventions, as well as common experiences. Receivers of the message use this same body of cultural knowledge to read the message, infer the sender’s intention, evaluate the argument, and formulate a response. (pp. 252-253)

Kenney and Scott (2003) add that consumer interpretations of visual symbols depend on the ideas and beliefs shared within a particular culture. Sexual images can be viewed in a variety of ways according to the culture in which they are presented. “In every case, the overriding influence of culture and history are crucial in giving the object rhetorical power” (p. 26). It is these embedded beliefs of a culture that affect both the production and reception of visual rhetoric in advertising.

Historically there are three different approaches to visual rhetoric, “classical, Burkeian, and ‘critical’” (Kenney & Scott, 2003). Classical criticism is a formal approach using multiple categories and set standards of measuring message quality. This tradition

often adapts the five canons of rhetoric for interpreting images: invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory. In the Burkeian approach to rhetoric, all messages have a motive, and the medium used becomes “symbolic action” in which a message’s producer tries to achieve a certain outcome (Kenney & Scott, 2003). Jacqueline Lambiase has pioneered research using Burke’s ideas in the analysis of visual rhetoric. The Critical approach to visual rhetoric is used with the intention of revealing something about a particular society’s power structure. This type of scholarship is derived from the cultural studies of the United Kingdom’s Birmingham School. Despite the variety of approaches available, however, little scholarship has focused on the “visual” rhetoric of women’s images—particularly eroticized images of women (and, increasingly, men).

Additionally, there is a fourth more recent and distinctly U.S. approach to visual rhetoric. This approach has two techniques known as “message formulation from images” and “evaluation of images,” as described by Foss (Foss, 1994; Foss & Kanengieter, 1992). These techniques look closely at the individual communicative elements of an image and the relationships among the elements to construct the message and the role of the visual images. Foss also applies a feminist perspective in using these methods of visual analysis in the study of visual rhetoric to reveal underlying messages about women.

Consumer interpretation of visual symbols is dependent on the ideas and beliefs shared within a particular culture. In the case of images of women, they can be viewed in a variety of ways, according to the culture in which they are presented and the life experiences audiences, including rhetorical critics, bring to reading such images. If advertising is a mirror to our society, as Williamson (1978) says, then it is important to

look at cultural images as messages about women, men, gender, sexuality, and sexual practices.

### *Foss' Method*

Mullen and Fisher (2004) combine, elaborate, and, in the end, condense Foss' method of visual rhetorical analysis into what they call the elaborated method. In this method, the first step is identifying the presented elements in a visual image, and Mullen and Fisher (2004) offer three categories of elements. In the first category, aesthetic elements, such as line and color, are most useful to note. Graphic representations of text—typography—also may be studied here. It may be helpful to think about this category as looking at traditional elements of artistic composition and graphic design. The next category of elements considers elements in terms of traditional mediated production techniques; this could be lighting, camera angle, and graphics, etc. Finally, the critic accounts for human interpersonal and nonverbal components represented, such as facial expressions, gaze, and body language (similar to Goffman's [1976] work).

After separating the presented elements into the three categories, the critic must process the visual elements and “examine the way the presented elements influence one another” (Mullen & Fisher, 2004, p. 188). In the elaborated method, the critic assumes that the “message is the function” of the image, in order to simplify Foss' original method, which separated the identification of message from the identification of the purpose (Foss, 1994; Foss & Kanengieter, 1992; Mullen & Fisher, 2004). The Mullen and Fisher (2004) method calls for the critic to postulate meanings, both denotative and connotative, and argue how these meanings influence each other or form relationships among the elements.

Finally, the elaborated method asks the critic to explore the function of the image before offering an ethical evaluation of it. Mullen and Fisher's (2004) definition of "function" refers to rhetorical function—how the image functions to convey the ad's persuasive message. Foss (1994) writes, "Function, which I have made central to the evaluation of imagery from a rhetorical perspective, is not, then, the function its creator intended but rather the action the image communicates, as named by the critic" (p. 216). She further cautions that "the function the critic names is but one possible function, it is by no means the correct one" (Foss, 1994, p. 216). Hence, "function" may not necessarily coincide with the traditional purpose of an advertising image (to sell the features and benefits of the brand). This last step also questions the ethics of the image when considered against possible audience effects, according to Mullen and Fisher's (2004) elaboration of the method.

If Lambiase and Reichert (2003) observe that erotic imagery in advertising often has nothing to do with communicating the advertised product's material features/benefits or with selling the brand per se, then their approach suggests yet another step in the analysis of visual rhetoric: There is value in assessing whether the image has a material relationship to qualities of the brand, or if the erotic appeal is gratuitous.

In this thesis Mullen and Fisher's (2004) elaboration of Foss' ideas serves as both a theoretical framework for understanding the way visual images act as rhetoric and as a method for analyzing the visual rhetoric of advertising imagery. This thesis adopts Mullen and Fisher's (2004) elaboration of Foss' techniques and expands upon the method using Lambiase and Reichert (2003).

## Chapter Five

### Research Questions

This thesis critiques and evaluates the persuasive sexual images in fashion advertisements found in men's magazines. The research questions guiding this study are: How are the persuasive arguments in ads containing sexualized images of women constructed as visual communication? Do the images presented perform their purported intention by conveying and/or supporting the supposed purpose of the ad—to sell the features and benefits of the advertised products? What do these images and their messages say about women, men, gender, and sexuality?



## Chapter Six

### Methodology

The five ads chosen for visual rhetorical analysis were taken from my previous content analysis of fashion advertisements found in men's "metro-sexual" magazines issued in April 2005 (Ford, 2006). The five advertisements chosen for analysis in the current study were among the worst offenders in the original study and fit into specific categories outlined in the earlier study.

*The original study:*

*"Fashion faux pas: Fashion advertising, sexy women, and men's magazines"*

My original study (Ford, 2006) was a content analysis of four popular men's magazines, *Maxim*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Details*, although it did not delve into the actual visual message of the ads. The original study merely categorized the ads by content, and found that fashion ads containing women in these magazines were likely to have sexual themes. The magazines chosen were from the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Magazine 300 Report by *AdAge* (September, 2004) as top circulation metro-sexual titles with a strong fashion emphasis. Metro-sexual magazines are defined as reaching out to young men ages 22 to 35. Metro-sexual, as it refers to magazines, also can be described by *Maxim* magazine's own tagline: "Sex. Sports. Beer. Gadgets. Fashion."

The original study pulled fashion advertising from the April 2005 issues of *Maxim*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Details*. The sample included all fashion advertisements,

including clothing, shoes, sunglasses, watches, jewelry, or any other items that may be worn on the human body. The ad sizes ranged from a quarter page to double- and triple-page spreads. This resulted in 152 fashion advertisements. From those 152 fashion ads, I pulled every ad showing any woman, group of women, or the implied presence of a woman (“implied presence of a woman” included a physical woman, her belongings, or some other visual sign or symbol of her presence). This resulted in 26 advertisements. The advertisements were then coded for the sexualization of women and overall sexual themes using criteria from Lambiase and Reichert (2003); visual cues or themes used to identify the presence of sexual themes were: A) lack of clothing or very little clothing; B) the gaze of models; C) body position; and D) body language.

Results showed that women in fashion advertising for these four metro-sexual magazines were often sexualized in the study sample and that women were reduced to beautiful objects of desire whose main purpose is to promise sexual gratification associated with purchasing or using the brand. Women in the ads were represented either as wanting (hetero)sex or as sexy objects of heterosexual men’s desire. This result agreed with Reichert and Carpenter (2004), who conclude that today’s magazine content has become more sexually explicit and racy than ever before, featuring more skin and more sexual situations.

My original study was illuminating, but, as critical work, it did not go far enough in terms of examining how such images work as a kind of visual rhetoric and then critiquing the implications of this kind of persuasion. As Condit (1989) notes, “Critical analysis should therefore, at least at times, be rhetorical; it should be tied to the particularity of occasions: specific audiences, with specific codes or knowledges,

addressed by specific programs and episodes” (p. 115). In this thesis, episodes or programs become specific magazine advertisements, although the present study does not explore audience members’ knowledge and skill at interpreting, as Condit’s (1989) argument on “rhetorical limits of polysemy” suggests. It is important, however, to take my first study one step further to do the critical-interpretive analysis of this kind of advertising as a visual rhetoric in a particular time, targeting a particular audience, and to ask questions about this advertising genre’s conventions.

### *The New Study*

Following Kenney’s (2005) advice to push the analysis of mediated visual images beyond social science or rhetorical formalism, this thesis takes the earlier study to the next level of analysis. Since analyzing every advertisement pulled for the original study is not feasible for the limited scope of a master’s thesis, the new study follows Lambiase and Reichert’s (2003) argument that exemplars of sexual rhetoric in advertising offer rich sites for analyzing, thus understanding, how sexual content in advertising works rhetorically. That is, the worst offenders of sexual visual rhetoric provide the most fruitful units of critical analysis. Vande Berg (1991) also made a case for the rhetorical analysis of exemplars based on the assumption that the principle features that define a genre or category of mediated rhetorical artifacts will be present for examination in its exemplars. This thesis, then, applies Mullen and Fisher’s (2004) visual rhetorical analysis techniques to the worst offenders among the advertisements analyzed in the original study.

Building on the initial study and using ads drawn from that study, the present study analyses the visual elements of persuasion in five of the ads from the original study.

The exemplar ads for this study were purposely selected because they represent the worst offenders in the original study. These ads also appear to represent one or more of the visual themes used in the original study, which were first laid out by Lambiase and Reichert (2003). The themes used to select the ads for this thesis include: A) lack of clothing or very little clothing; B) the gaze of models; C) body position; and D) body language. This method was chosen so that the present study would have representation across all four themes. The goal was to obtain a variety of visual elements that would put each ad into at least one thematic category, even though some overlapping does occur.

Advertisement one is a full-page, full-color ad from *GQ* for Banana Republic (Appendix A-1), and it was chosen according to the original coding to best represent the category of lack of clothing and body language because the figure of the woman is not wearing pants, the man in the ad is fully clothed, and they appear in a bedroom.

Three of the four themes are represented in the second ad, a black and white Calvin Klein Jeans advertisement (Appendix A-2) found in *Maxim*. Nudity combined with the body position and body language make this a highly sexual ad and a solid reason for its inclusion in the study. The Calvin Klein advertisement is a two-page spread featuring a woman with a nude torso positioned on top of man with a nude torso.

Advertisement three is a single-page black and white ad for David Yurman (Appendix A-3) from *Details*. It represents the categories of body language and lack of clothing. In this ad the man is the one shown without clothing, except for the watch he is wearing, and the fully clothed woman is wearing jewelry as well. This nudity role-reversal is one reason why this ad was chosen.

The fourth advertisement is a *GQ* ad for Rockport (Appendix A-4). It is a full-color single-page ad that shows coded themes of lack of clothing, body position, and body language. The two white models in the ad appear to be naked in this close-up visual. The couple seems to be taking a shower together with a not-too-subtle hint at sexual relations.

The final ad is a full-color one for Sketchers Footwear (Appendix A-5) pulled from both *GQ* and *Maxim*. This single page ad was coded for each of the four themes: models' gaze, lack of clothing, body position, and body language. The white figures in this ad are set in a glacier-like or arctic-like cartoon landscape. The woman in the ad, kneeling on one knee, is positioned between the man's legs. She is wearing a bikini top and skirt, which appears to be made of animal skin and fur. She is grasping the man's shirt in one hand and a whip in the other hand. The man is leaning back on one arm pushing the woman back with his other arm. The man featured is fully clothed, and he is looking directly at her as he turns his head away. The woman in the ad is looking directly into the man's eyes. Rhetoric and popular culture scholar Tom Frenzt (personal communication, April 2006) also noted that this exemplar deserves further study because of its gender role reversal.

Some caveats regarding the selected exemplars are in order. First, all the exemplar advertisements depict images of heterosexuality. Some scholars have noted that homosexual images and themes in men's magazine advertising are ripe for exploration (Kolbe & Albanese, 1996; Krasses, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; McRee & Denham, 2006). However, Krasses, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003) concluded that men's magazines such as *Maxim* and *Stuff* encourage heterosexual lifestyles since they market

themselves to young men using heteronormative sexual content. My original study contradicted this argument somewhat since I found homosexual themes present in fashion ads, although I did not find any themes of lesbianism. Because the ads that were open to gay readings in the first study did not offer representations of women, they were not analyzed in the first study. Since the present second study is based on the worst sexual rhetoric offenders in terms of representations of women from the original study, the ads containing gay themes were not included here, either.

Second, the exemplars chosen for this thesis all portray young models. This bias can be explained due to the fact that the magazine genre under analysis targets young adult men as readers. Finally, all but possibly one of the exemplars selected for the present study depict white models, with just one ad using what readers may interpret as a model of color. Race and ethnicity were not used as selection criteria per se, and this mostly white trend among the exemplars occurred spontaneously as the “worst offenders” surfaced in the original study. It should be noted, however, that, in U.S. magazine advertising, women of color (especially black women) historically have tended to be exoticized (as animalistic and predatory), eroticized, and sexualized at a greater rate than white women, even though the percentage of women of color appearing in magazine ads is far lower than that of white women in magazine advertising or than the percentage of women of color in the general population (Plous & Neptune, 1997).

Following Mullen and Fisher (2004), who elaborated and streamlined Foss’ techniques of visual rhetorical analysis (Foss, 1994; Foss & Kanengieter, 1992), this thesis analyzes exemplar advertisements considered “worst offenders” in terms of sexual content in the representation of women from the original study (Ford, 2006). This kind of

analysis has practical and ethical implications for media practices by asking, “What do the ads’ visual rhetorics *do*?” In addition, it is also imperative to ask how do the messages available for reading within the visuals speak of, for, and to the present historical moment in terms of men, women, gender, and sexuality?

## Chapter Seven

### Analysis

The five advertisements in this study suggest that men are main characters in adventurous and luxurious lifestyles associated with the advertised brand, and women are accoutrements, little different than the advertised products, to these lifestyles. The women in the ads, by their physical proximity to the fashion products in the ads, become stand-ins for these products, mere objects to adorn the men. This narrative suggests that women are interchangeable with the ads' products, which function as key accessories to the fantasy heterosexual masculine lifestyles advertised. Additionally, the women in the ads, while portrayed as sexually adventurous, are visually subordinate to the men. In the (hetero)sexually intimate situations portrayed in these ads, visual cues also suggest that women and men who are sexually intimate are not emotionally intimate. These five ads, then, seem to place the importance of the brand, represented by the men in the ads, over the importance of the actual product, which, in these ads, is represented by the women. Thus, the visual rhetoric of these ads invites the young men who view them to identify with the personality of the brand—or brand character—which is represented in the ads by the men and their lifestyles. This suggests an old advertising industry story, albeit with some new twists, in which men are more powerful, important, and independent than



women, in which relationships between women and men are merely sexual ones, and in which women are signified as equivalent to the property of men.

### *The Visual Elements*



In the first exemplar ad, Banana Republic's visual elements, such as the woman's long dark vertical legs and the large size of the torso in the foreground, pull the viewing eye towards the large foreground figure. Taking up nearly half the page and clearly dominating the ad, the large torso forms an asymmetrical balance between the torso and the logo placed in the large white space at the bottom of the ad. The torso is wearing neutral clothing; the long-legged figure, pink.

Assuming the seated figure is a man and the standing figure is a woman, the colors of the two figures are gender appropriate, according to gender rules that code pink as feminine.

We may infer that this ad features a sexual relationship since the scene is staged in what appears to be a bedroom and the woman is not wearing pants; however, the two figures have their backs to one another, possibly indicating through their body language that it may not be an *emotionally* intimate relationship. The figure in the foreground is headless, so readers can only assume it is a man until the narrative text identifies the figure as a "he." The ad's copy reads: "As usual, the postcards he wrote were still in their luggage."

The visual of the headless man contradicts itself. A larger figure generally reads as "superior" in an ad such as this, and yet this larger figure's head is cropped off, which

means the figure is less important and he is only as good as his emphasized buttocks (Goffman, 1976; Jhally, 2000; Kilbourne, 1979, 1987). However, this headless anonymous man also could be what Williamson (1978) argues is the “hole” in which the viewer (in these ads, a male viewer) inserts himself into the advertisement’s narrative. According to the narrative (“he wrote”) and visual texts (larger foreground figure), the man appears as the main character.

Conversely, he sits on the “floor” of the ad’s scene, and historically, this positioning goes against Goffman’s (1976) findings in which women and children as subordinates often appear positioned on the floor. However, additional visual cues such as the partially dressed headless woman with her back to the man and her classically feminine pink clothing, her childlike pose on her tiptoes, and her positioning in the background, all suggest that this woman is a subordinate. In addition to clues about the woman’s subordinate status in this ad’s visual narrative, a key bit of visual information is her visual proximity to the product advertised. She literally “stands in” (for) the product advertised, a Banana Republic shirt. Her role seems to be as both travel and fashion accessory, not much different than his shirt that she is wearing as she stands in the closet where we might expect his shirt usually to hang or his suitcase open on the floor in the scene where he would pack this shirt. The ad suggests a closet, a suitcase, or a woman becomes a suitable place to put a man’s Banana Republic wardrobe when not in use.



The visual elements presented in the second ad by Calvin Klein create visual texture; the grass/leaves

repeated around the human figures create a frame of greenery focusing the eye on the bodies in the center. The woman's rounded shoulder pulls the viewer down her arm to her elbow pointed at the logo at the bottom of the page.

The woman's exposed breast in the center of the ad is positioned atop the man's crotch. This juxtaposition suggests that this woman also may be substituted for the product: wear the jeans or wear the woman. Similar to the Banana Republic ad, this woman also wears the product advertised, in this case, a pair of Calvin Klein jeans. The scene in the ad shows part of a single motorcycle, which is a traditional masculine cultural artifact that harkens back to James Dean and Marlon Brando. Motorcycles signify rebellion and the adventure of the open road for those who have no place-bound obligations or relationships. The ad essentially transfers the characteristics of this sexual adventure and nature fantasy to the jean brand, as Williamson (1978) argues that advertisements do.

Demonstrating Goffman's (1976) arguments about the feminine touch and eye aversion, the Calvin Klein ad's visual cues suggest that the woman is less important than the man. There is no eye contact between the man and woman because she is looking down at the man's chest as she gently caresses him. The man does not touch her, emphasizing her status as an object like the jeans and the motorcycle. Again, there does not seem to be any emotional intimacy in what is suggested to be a sexual situation, but the woman does appear sexually assertive given her position atop the half-undressed man.

The Calvin Klein ad is literally just body parts; the man's head is missing, but his crotch and the woman's breast become the ad's center of visual interest or focal point.

The headless man is shirtless, although it is perfectly acceptable for men to go shirtless, especially in a rugged outdoors adventure scene such as the one suggested in the ad. So, in essence, only the woman is exposed. According to Kilbourne (1979), both models are broken down into sexual body parts, which are the only parts necessary for a sexual fantasy, of course. The dismemberment dehumanizes both characters. But this headless man's torso invites the viewer, in this instance a male viewer, once again to place himself into what Williamson (1978) contends is the "hole" in which viewers identify with the fantasy narrative of the advertisement.

The ad suggests that both the jeans and the woman, like the motorcycle, are necessary accoutrements to the adventurous lifestyle the ad's scene implies. On the whole, the Calvin Klein ad suggests that the bare-breasted woman is an accessory in this fantasy. For a second time in this study, the woman literally stands in (or lies down in) the product, a pair of jeans.



The black and white ad for David Yurman jewelry, the third exemplar, is aesthetically balanced. The figures and visual elements mimic each other, and there are nearly equal areas of light and dark. A line is created down the center of the ad between the naked man and clothed woman; the line draws the eye down to the ad's watch, bracelet, and finally logo. Though the space covered by the man and woman is nearly equal, the man's

head is positioned slightly in the foreground where, according to Goffman (1976), the most important character usually appears.

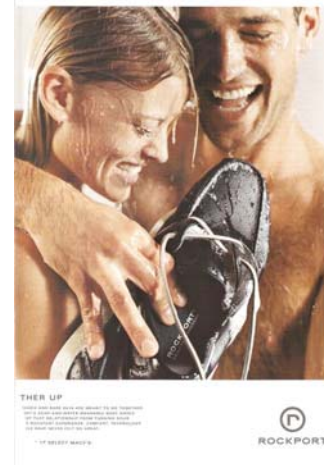
This ad is an example of a gender role reversal created by the man's nudity and the woman's state of full dress (a robe or dressing gown, perhaps?). In traditional "sex sells" advertising, the woman is partially nude, as in the Calvin Klein and Banana Republic ads. In the David Yurman ad, the man's hair also appears longer than the woman's (and most men's), and the woman appears to be making the sexual advance. The man almost appears to display the feminine head cant that Goffman (1976) describes, but so does the woman; head cants, however, are required to navigate around noses in preparation for kissing, which the David Yurman ad's figures seem close to doing. The visual cues that indicate a gender role reversal also could represent feminine insubordination or power. She is making the move on him as she reaches to caress his face with Goffman's (1976) feminine touch. His hand, however, grips her wrist, symbolizing feminine subordination since he still controls her physically in this sexually charged situation.

Both the woman and the man in the Yurman ad seem to represent Goffman's (1976) feminine mental drift, as their expressions take them away from the physical moment. The facial expressions of both characters lack emotion, as they both look downward, and, significantly, away from each other. This is no eye contact. This head/eye aversion allows one momentarily to conceal one's feelings, or, in this case, perhaps, lack of feeling. In another type of licensed withdrawal, the woman nuzzles in just slightly behind the man, signifying the man's greater importance and his control over her.

On the whole, the David Yurman ad depicts conventional portrayals of men and women in which men have greater power than women, usually demonstrated visually by

subtle forms of physical domination. The woman, though shown in a kind of role reversal, quite literally has lost her “upper hand” in this situation. Having been subordinated, and given her physical proximity to the advertised product/jewelry, the woman wraps herself around the man as if he is wearing her in the same way he wears David Yurman jewelry. For a third time, the woman in the ad becomes both a stand-in for the advertised product as she is wearing the jewelry, too. As a stand in for the product, she becomes an accessory to the man playing the lead role in the narrative of this ad.

In the fourth ad, the large Rockport shoes pictured in the foreground are the focal point of the scene. The background is all neutral flesh tones (and flesh). Several lines (the man’s fingers, streams of water, strands of wet hair, shoe laces) move the eye down toward the text and the logo. In this ad, the text plays the most functional advertising role among all the exemplars in this study. The headline reads: “Lather Up,” and the body reads:



Boat shoes and bare skin are meant to go together. Rockport’s soap and water washable boat shoes will keep that relationship from turning sour.

Feel the Rockport experience. Comfort, technology and style have never felt so great.

This text actually gives product features and benefits. But there is some unnecessary text that connects the shoes to sex. The text reads, “Boat shoes and bare skin are meant to go together,” and although it is true that boat shoes are often worn without socks, the two apparently naked models shown with this text seem to suggest that the shoes also go with

nudity and, most likely, sex. The text also suggests that the shoes' features keep smelly feet and (sexual) relationships from going sour.

The Rockport ad shows several of Goffman's (1976) gender ritualizations that imply women are inferior. For instance, the woman displays Goffman's feminine head cant and eye aversion as she lowers her head and looks downward. The lack of eye contact between the models in this ad may demonstrate that the relationship between the man and woman lacks emotional attachment, though their nudity proves physical intimacy. The man's arm encircles the woman's shoulder, which signifies the woman's subordination to him. The man holds both the woman and the shoes near his chest, as if to protect both as his possessions. For a fourth time, the woman in the ad appears to be interchangeable with the advertised product, in this case a shoe, by physical proximity.

The main design emphasis in the Sketchers Footwear ad, the fifth and last exemplar, is on the man and woman. They appear in the center of the ad, and the light-colored background provides a neutral palette for the two models' performance. The eye is drawn to the dark center of this proportional advertisement. The purple sky and the dark grey bottom of the ad create symmetrical balance. The center figures wear opposite colors, and the light and dark clothing intertwine. The models' arms create balance between their bodies as his right arm extends backwards and her left arm weakly attempts to raise a flaccid whip. His dark-colored right arm leads the eye down to the logo.



Even though the woman is kneeling on the ground, following Goffman's (1976) observation that women and children as subordinates often appear depicted on the floor,



the woman is still positioned higher than and above the man who also is sitting on the ground. The man is leaning back, looking up at the woman. But this is not exactly masculine subordination—at least not the kind that lasts beyond the implied sexual encounter. His viewpoint is reminiscent of Jhally's (1990, 1995, 2007) arguments in the "Dreamworlds" series on music videos that camera angles emphasize the adolescent fantasy of boys looking up girls' skirts. Though the woman's position breaks historical advertising gender rules, she is barely clothed while the man is fully dressed. Her lowered head shows that in the end she still submits to the man. Lambiase and Reichert (2003) argue that visual cues such as lack of clothing, body language, body position, and the gaze of models signify the presence of sexual overtone. In the Sketchers exemplar, the woman's skimpy outfit (on a glacier), eye contact, body position, and body language then indicate that the woman is present to signify "sex."

At the top of the page the headline reads, "We put the S in action!"—an ambiguous if not incomprehensible message. The headline could mean "Action!" as in a film director's shout at the start of a movie scene. The headline could mean "action" as in the man is looking to get some sexual action. The "S" could represent Sketchers, sex, or even S&M. Readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

Facial expressions in the Sketchers ad suggest that the two actors do not like each other; however, their body language and the woman's position between the man's legs suggests physical intimacy. The man and the woman are ready either to harm one another or tear off each other's clothes in the heat of passion—or both. As his hand spreads across her bare stomach, the notably larger scale of his hand to her stomach is emphasized. Because this size difference displays the man's features more prominently,



Goffman (1976) might have argued that this size ratio emphasizes the man's importance over the woman. He clearly could overpower her physically if he were in real danger of being whipped by a woman.

The woman kneels at the man's feet, not only a ritualized position often used to signify supplication but also positioning the woman literally at the man's feet where the advertised product is shown. The woman even wears brown leather, the material the shoes are made of. For the fifth time, the woman and the product, in this case a pair of shoes, are visually connected, which seems to suggest that they are substitutes for one another.

Ultimately the woman in the Sketchers ad displays signs of submission through sexual intimation as she and other elements exhibit further advertising rituals for signifying gender such as the head cant and size ratio (Goffman, 1976). The ad suggests that a woman can be in charge—if she wears little or no clothing, is sexually adventurous, and makes herself available for heterosexual masculine pleasure (or pain, depending on one's proclivities). As in the all the exemplar ads, the Sketcher's ad suggests that a woman is interchangeable with the advertised product while a man signifies both the brand that owns the product as well as the characteristics of the lifestyle associated with the brand.

In the heterosexual patriarchal gender hierarchy, men are symbolically superior to women. In marketing and advertising, the brand owns the product. In the exemplars, these two relationships of superiority and ownership are transferred to the women and men in the ads. In all five advertisements, the men seem to represent or stand in for the advertiser's brand. The women appear to be interchangeable with the product.

Furthermore, the five ads suggest to the target audience—young metro-sexual men—that heterosexual relationships with women are about physical, not emotional or interpersonal, intimacy.

### *Denotative and Connotative Meanings*

The five exemplars toy with popular understandings of the women's movements only to recuperate them back into more traditional symbolic gender relations. Women may be powerful and assertive, but only in their quest for sex with men. Women's equality is signified as sexual freedom. Women's independence is limited to emotional independence in their sexual relationships. Men may be submissive to the sexual advances of women, but only to a point. Men's bodies may be atomized into sex objects (for women), but only insofar as men retain symbolic superiority in the social order along with their physical dominance and control over women. Women and men may be partners, but only in their equally strong sexual urges. Williamson (1978) argues that advertisements not only *sell things to us* in the literal sense, but also make the products and brands being sold *mean something to us*. Those who do not read advertising critically end up purchasing the meanings sold in advertising, which may or may not have much to do with the material features and benefits of the products advertised. In the exemplars, the meanings being sold offer much more information about cultural myths of young heteronormative masculinity than about the advertised products themselves.

In the advertisement for Banana Republic, the denotative meanings communicate that the man and woman are travelers. Visually the fully dressed man sits on the "floor," and the half-dressed woman wearing an over-sized pink shirt and pink underwear stands in a closet. A suitcase lies open with its contents strewn on the floor. The visual text

invites the viewer to imagine the two figures in a sexual relationship. However, the suggestiveness of the situation portrayed, as well as the written text (“As usual, the postcards he wrote were still in their luggage”) communicates that the man not only travels frequently (“as usual...”) but also has sex frequently as he travels (since the postcards—*as usual*—are still in the luggage). Regarding connotative meaning, the visuals of his clothes on the suitcase are replicated by her because she also wears his clothes. She, too, is one of his possessions, one of his accoutrements. The woman and the clothing are interchangeable adornments. Thus, if you own the clothing, you can obtain the lifestyle that includes this woman, the sex, the travels, etc. Essentially the imagery argues a connection between this lifestyle and this brand. The lifestyle signifies the brand, which is cast as heterosexually masculine.

The advertisement for Calvin Klein shows a man and a woman next to a single motorcycle all nestled in the grass. Both the man and the woman are wearing Calvin Klein jeans and nothing else, and it is obvious by the positioning of their bodies that they are about to be sexually intimate. The denotative meaning is clear. Connotatively, it appears that the two have ridden the one motorcycle together to what we can hope is a secluded outdoors setting. This suggests that, whatever else the woman rides, it will not be her own motorcycle. Indeed, according to this ad’s imaginary, the woman and the motorcycle both are ride-able. In fact, the woman, the jeans, and the motorcycle are all symbolically connected to man’s crotch, and so the woman, the jeans, and the motorcycle are, in a sense, interchangeable accessories for the man’s crotch. Skipping the Freudian implications and psychoanalytic interpretations regarding the phallus, this association in the ad implies that the woman, jeans, and motorcycle are all possessions owned and

controlled by the man. The ad persuades the reader that by consuming the brand, one can obtain women, sex, recreational vehicles, and the rebellious lifestyle that goes with it all. By giving the product (represented by the woman) and brand (represented by the man) *meaning*, this ad literally genders the product as feminine and the brand as masculine. Here femininity is defined as an object owned by masculinity, and masculinity is defined by a lifestyle that caters to one's crotch.

David Yurman's advertisement denotes a fully clothed woman who cannot keep her hands off of a shirtless man. The only adornments the man wears in the ad are bracelets and a woman. The connotative meaning of this ad suggests that wearing David Yurman jewelry is like wearing a woman—or just as good as having a woman draped on you. Once again, the woman is interchangeable with the product—a piece of property. She becomes the jewelry or adornment and, thus, his possession. Williamson (1978) argues that a product in an ad literally becomes the reader, but in this ad the woman (not the target metro-sexual reader as man) becomes the product and a “brand characteristic.” One can own the characteristics of the brand by owning the product, and, in the present case, these characteristics include beautiful women who cannot keep their hands off of the men as readers invited to identify with the advertised brand. Brand equals man who owns the product that equals woman.

Outdoor or physical activity is the denotative meaning derived from the Rockport shoe advertisement featuring a naked man and woman. This activity, possibly boating, requires the couple to take a shower—together. The ad's connotative meaning, however, suggests that the woman is associated and interchangeable with the shoes; even the strands of her hair replicate the shoestrings that hang down from the shoe. The man must

preserve his toys to keep them in good working order; before he puts the boat, the woman, and the shoes away for the day, he needs to “maintain” them. The man “owns” both the shoe and the woman he grips. Goffman (1976) argues that the “shoulder hold” is a gender ritualization symbolizing subordination and sexual proprietary. The woman seems to accept the man holding her. He controls her moves and takes ownership of her—and the shoes. Brand/man controls product/woman. Owning Rockport shoes, then, is as good as having a woman in your shower. This ad suggests that one can obtain the same lifestyle represented by the brand, which includes taking showers with women—and your shoes.

The Sketchers shoe advertisement shows a surreal glacier setting where storm clouds are gathering. The man is lying on the ground propped up on one arm as he fends off a petite dominatrix; the woman wears only an animal skin bikini and high heels. The ad implies that the dominatrix is about to physically overpower the man, though clearly by the man’s size he is capable of saving himself—even if the reader is invited to imagine that he will not. The tiny Amazon woman is a fantasy, just like the cartoon glacier they kneel upon. In the background, the dark clouds suggest a storm is brewing, threatening thunder and lightening. These atmospheric “fireworks” may imply the sexual fireworks about to occur between the man and the woman as she kneels between his legs. Denotatively, the ad is pure nonsense about shoes, cold climates, and chilly women. Connotatively, the ad is a fantasy about sexual adventure—in which it is best to keep your Sketchers shoes on your feet. Glaciers and lovemaking are cold affairs—and the shoes may be needed for traction to grip the ice, whether for running away—or not.

The sexual situation in the Sketcher ad is a gender role reversal with the woman role-playing as dominatrix—an S&M fantasy even. Perhaps the cartoon setting suggests that “hell has frozen over” to allow this particular fantasy to come true. This constructed ad-fantasy offers a glimpse into the advertiser’s beliefs about the target reader’s heteronormative relationships with women. Women may feign control of the heterosexual relationship, but only terms of sexual assertiveness. Clearly, the ad’s woman is not really in control as she is about to catch pneumonia kneeling at the feet of a man whose hand is as big as her entire head. And should things turn for the worse, she will not get far because her stilettos are not Sketchers.

The Sketcher’s ad is not the only one among the exemplars about chilly relationships. For the target market of men who read them, all five exemplars communicate narratives in which sex with women is an emotionally detached physical activity associated with adventurous lifestyles, masculine superiority, and feminine subordination. Williamson (1978) argues that advertisements must sell not only material products but also the symbolic meanings. When stripped of its “fashion” meanings, clothing essentially represents a parity product with few distinguishing features to sell as “USPs” (unique selling propositions). Thus it is the brand’s symbolic meaning transferred to the product that positions or brands the product as singular, special, or different. In the case of the exemplars, branding *means* the same thing over and over again: Real men are brand men who consume, thus become, particular lifestyles. Real men do not really care about what they look like wearing fashions; nor do they especially care about the functional features of the fashions they wear. Real men merely need the appropriate

accoutrements to symbolize, thus prove, their manhood, including women adorning the scene as they seek sex (heterosexual sex of course).

### *Rhetorical Function*

The five advertisements in this study essentially sell the brand, not the product ostensibly advertised, and they sell the brand as a particular kind of masculine lifestyle that includes women and sex but not intimacy. The visual elements that make up the advertisements argue that a brand's masculine lifestyle is signified through branded possessions that are treated as casually as their relationships with women. These branded possessions not only include clothing, recreational equipment, jewelry, and shoes but also women, who become branded as they are positioned as interchangeable with the advertised products. The ads attempt to define a heterosexual masculine lifestyle with their brands' characteristics, which include the availability and ease of having sex with women. The women's roles are as "accessories" to the men. The women have no other parts in the ads; they are interchangeable with products and their sexual availability functions as a key accessory to the masculine lifestyle. Thus, the visual rhetoric of these ads invites the young men who view them to identify with the personality of the brand, called "brand character." Women, the ads argue, are not *partners* in this branded lifestyle; women, like the branded products being sold, are accessories that prove the heterosexual masculinity of the lifestyle and the men who live it. In sum, in each of the five ads, the man becomes the symbol of the brand, and, narratively speaking, the brand becomes the symbol of heterosexual manhood or masculinity.

Lambiase and Reichert (2003) have argued persuasively that the idea of "sex sells" in advertising often means that ads sell the imaginary promise of sex: "If you buy,

and thus consume, this product, then you will get to have sex.” This is a linear cause-and-effect logic that promises a return on the consumption investment with a sexual payout. However, in this study, I wish to argue that the five exemplars shift the promise of sex with a woman from being a payoff for consumption to a more casual and naturalized sign of heterosexual masculinity.

For example, imagine a photograph of a shining sports car for sale with a bikini-clad model sitting on the car’s hood. This model is either ready to kiss the reader or is embracing a man standing between her legs in the photo. His face is most likely obscured. By Lambiase and Reichert’s argument, there is no intrinsic relationship between the car as a product for consumption and a half-dressed woman. But the visual rhetoric of such an image suggests that buying the car will attract a sexual encounter with a beautiful woman. So it is the sexual encounter as much as the car that the image sells. In the present case of the five exemplars, however, I argue that it is neither the car nor the sexual encounter that is being sold. Instead what is being sold is the promise of proving a rather traditional heterosexual masculine virility associated with the lifestyle of owning both the car and the woman. Banana Republic is not selling clothing to young adult men; it is selling the adornments, including desirable women, of a young heterosexual lifestyle for traveling men. Calvin Klein is not selling jeans; it is selling the promise of a rugged, carefree heterosexual lifestyle for men. David Yurman is not selling jewelry per se; David Yurman is selling a man’s lifestyle that can afford designer jewelry and the women who wear it. Rockport may be selling shoes in this study’s exemplar ad, but it is also selling the idea of the heterosexual Rockport man (who does not shave the hair from his



chest) whose leisure lifestyle is more complete with both a pair of Rockports and a pair of breasts next to his naked skin. Sketchers, a brand typically associated with a younger target market, is not selling shoes; Sketchers is selling a cartoon-like adolescent fantasy about being irresistible to petite, half-dressed sexually aggressive women.

In a culture of image and branding, one needs the branded accoutrements of the lifestyle to signify one's membership in the lifestyle—even if the lifestyle does not exist per se outside of the advertising industry, corporate branding, and entertainment industry that invent it—and even if the young target market generally is not in a position to afford such a lifestyle if it does exist. In fact, none of the scenes in the exemplars signify jobs, careers, or lifestyle-maintaining labor. These are fantasies. Considered within the context of the target audience of the metro-sexual magazines in which the exemplar ads appear, I also argue that the young men who read these magazines, because of their young age, are more than likely not nearly so sexually experienced, self-confident, or blasé about their sexuality as the exemplar ads imply. Indeed, I would argue, this young target audience of men if anything might tend to be insecure about masculinity and sexual prowess. Like the advertising promise of curing a headache by consuming a pill, the exemplars promise a cure to heterosexual gender insecurity through associating oneself with brands. Buy this brand, associate with our products, to achieve the “image” of this lifestyle and “advertise” your heterosexual manhood. The gender story here not only suggests a soulless kind of sexual intimacy for men and women, but also positions women as products to be treated as possessions in a disposable culture. This story also characterizes women as sexually aggressive yet submissive to heterosexual masculine authority.

Each of the five exemplars visually suggests to young men as viewers that, by purchasing the “brand,” they accrue a certain heteronormative masculine caché associated with the lifestyle symbolized in the ad. A brand is the sum total of the products and services offered by a company, but brands also can take on iconic lives of their own. Brand character is defined by consumer perceptions, and it endures over time even though the product line or services change. Because marketers do not always have control over how the brand character develops or changes in the minds of consumers, contemporary advertising works hard to project the traits or characteristics a corporation wishes to be part of the brand’s character. In a very real sense, then, contemporary advertising focuses more on brand image than on product features and benefits.

In this study the visual elements of the ads suggest that the *real* men have certain characteristics, which also happen to be associated with the advertised brands. Associate yourself with the brand by buying the products in order to become this man and signify this lifestyle. For example, the Banana Republic ad’s visuals argue that a Banana Republic man is a traveler who has access to so much hetero sex on his treks that he has difficulty getting out of his hotel room to mail his postcards. The ad suggests that putting Banana Republic clothes in your closet or your suitcase is equivalent to putting your Banana Republic shirt on a half-dressed woman in a bedroom. The visuals in the Calvin Klein ad suggest that a Calvin Klein man is a rebellious outdoorsman, so much so that he trades the Banana Republic man’s bedroom for a patch of weeds. Associating with this brand means strapping a pair of CK jeans, a motorcycle, and a beautiful topless woman to your crotch. The Rockport man is also an outdoors guy. The visual elements and the text

suggest that this rugged Rockport outdoorsman is physical enough to get his equipment sweaty and dirty—as well as his shoes, his woman, and maybe even his boat. A little soap and water cleans it up—all at once if he is efficient. The David Yurman man is more refined. He likes the feel of fine jewelry, as well as beautiful women who find him irresistible, on his bare skin. He might come off as a little vain with his long hair and penchant for adornment, but he’s definitely in control of his life—and his women. Finally, a Sketchers man is about “action,” adventure, and fantasy, including the kind that a scantily clad petite dominatrix provides. He can handle any situation anywhere, even on a glacier.

The rhetorical function of these ads goes beyond merely selling a product. Each of these ads positions the brand itself via images that represent a certain kind of man and associated masculine lifestyle. Women are cast as one more possession or product necessary for the lifestyle. In the ads, there are no messages about the symbolic, material, or emotional work, labor, or cost involved in obtaining or maintaining the lifestyle, just as there is no work involved in getting women to find you sexually irresistible. The ads suggest that becoming the branded man comes naturally. The ads say this is the “natural” order of things, and, even if it is not, the brand says it can improve upon nature (Williamson, 1978). This kind of men’s fashion advertising is not about getting “the look” on the material body the way we typically think about fashion. Here, lifestyle *is* the “look,” an ensemble of visual accoutrements extending beyond the material body that signify an independent unattached heterosexual manhood. Indeed, the woman as

accoutrement becomes a key accessory for signifying the “heterosexual” part because, otherwise, the lifestyles in the exemplars could be misconstrued as homosexual.

## Chapter Eight

### Discussion

The visuals in this study speak to the current historical moment in terms of gender and sexuality. While we may find some new advertising approaches to gender and sex in the exemplar ads, the story remains a familiar one in which men are winners and women are losers. The exemplars construct an “ideal” heteronormative view of gender and sexuality, but now they have become branded commodities available for purchase and consumption. If gender and sexuality have always functioned as social normalizing and idealizing factors, then the consistent kind of gender and sexuality for sale in the five magazine exemplar ads represents a standardized ideal of normal. According to these five ads, a reading man can purchase the ideal normal hetero brand/man/masculinity, which includes mastery over one’s world and financial and interpersonal independence. Women, in this world of men, are necessary possessions proving the ideal normal manhood.

Essentially, the five ads in this study mimic traditional U.S. patriarchal beliefs about gender and sexuality. However, these five ads are not selling Lambiase and Riechert’s (2004) promise of sex in return for consumption of product. In this study, the ads sell reading men a reflection of their more ideal manhood. This ideal masculine heterosexual self dominates each ad’s world, including a woman in it, and suggests real

men also dominate their life worlds. A study by Pompper, Soto, and Piel (2007) of 108 men revealed that men of different ethnicities and age groups agree that magazines have power to set the standards for the “ideal” man. The ads in this study, however, also feature women, and this study suggests that these five ads attempt to define women’s gender roles as well. These ads suggest that being a woman means being part of the décor, or landscape, akin to a possession to be purchased and consumed like any other product. Women are necessary fashion accessories signifying heterosexual masculinity. In this advertising logic, the brand becomes equivalent to man and masculinity and the brand’s product becomes equivalent to woman and femininity.

Berger (1972) and Rose (2001) write about Western visual traditions of men dominating the landscape and nature, always symbolically feminized. This “way of seeing” includes man as the surveyor of all that he owns. In visual terms, man is assumed to be the viewer. But, if he is represented visually, he is represented as the conqueror of the material world he possesses. Power is equated with colonizing space, external to man as agent, and this colonization may be either visual, material, or both, because the symbolic order remains the same: man as master. Berger notes that, with the rise of capitalism, this view of controlling nature has evolved to include a logic that equates what can be seen with what can be purchased and thus possessed. Both Berger (1972) and Rose (2001) critique the gendering of this way of seeing as reproduced in the conventions of visual representation. In this logic, women become objects to be seen and possessed. In this study’s five advertisements, each man not only plays the main character in the scene of the ad but also colonizes the entire space of the ad. In the logic of the five ads, a man does not rely solely on his physical/material body to define him. All that he

possesses defines him as well, including commodities/women and the scene/landscape of their consumption. This scene functions as a mirror reflecting who he is, whether “he” is the visual narrative’s protagonist or the reader gazing at the ad where he will insert himself into the role of the protagonist. In advertising, this visual rhetoric positions women as equivalent to products adorning the landscape, possessions of the men who possess and define themselves through the landscape. Most damaging, this tells a gender story that symbolically and materially privileges men with not just greater power than women, but power over women.

Indeed, if the brand defines the product, then, in the exemplar ads’ gendered equivalence, the man defines the woman, thus the relationship between a man and woman. In the ads, he is her master, and heterosexual seduction is her only agency. Her role is aggressively to woo him the way advertisers court consumers. Additionally, while interaction between the men and women in the five ads is sexual, these human relations communicate no interpersonal intimacy. The heteronormative relationships in the ads are defined visually through adventurous locations, physically demanding leisure, and sexual situations; however the sex appears detached and without emotion. The images in these five advertisements suggest that sex is a casual physical leisure activity with no with strings attached. In each exemplar, the sex act is severed from human intimacy. Heterosexual relationships are defined as physical sex.

If the exemplars define manhood and relations between men and women, then they also define the meanings of masculinity and femininity. Heterosexual masculinity in these ads is decidedly not about the domestic; masculinity is adventuresome. Masculinity also requires possessions as accoutrements to signify itself, and heterosexual masculinity

requires the possession of a woman to signify itself. Heterosexual masculinity signified by adventure and wealth also requires a landscape or scene in which to act as master, and in the exemplars the scene is one of leisure, neither wholly public nor wholly private, dissociated from a job or career—the labor necessary to acquire such a lifestyle for most men. In addition, masculinity means demonstrating power over women who are sexually assertive to flatter his greater sexual prowess and power over his life world. Heterosexual femininity is defined in the exemplars as having a strong sexual attraction to heterosexual men. This feminine sexuality is not merely passively available; it is insistent, even aggressive. One might be tempted to read this advertising sexual assertiveness as a sign of women's increasing social empowerment, yet it is neutralized through the ads' other messages that women's sexuality serves men. It might be argued that in this narrative, the women's movement is contained within women's sexual urges, which, in turn, are contained by men. In the exemplars, women's sexuality means little for women's empowerment. Instead it is reduced to an accoutrement to the heterosexual masculine lifestyle, a kind of masculine trophy proving the virility of his masculinity (as opposed to his procreative powers). Heteronormative gender is, therefore, defined in the ads as a hierarchy in which men (brand) are more important and active than women (product). A woman's power to act, her agency, is limited to the power to seek physical sexual contact with a man on his own terms within his own world, where she is merely an object.

Although the symbolic, thus socio-cultural, hierarchy of men over women is not new, in some ways the portrayal of sex and sexual intimacy in this study appears to go against traditional Western cultural thinking about sex. Mass media and popular culture



sometimes are regarded as a bellwether for what is considered ideal normal sex, sexuality, sexual practice, and attractiveness for consumers (Berger, 1991; Bordo, 1999; Krasses, Bauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; Pompper, Soto, & Piel, 2007; Watson, 1998). According to Rubin (1984), Westerners consider sex (in life and in media) a negative force, dangerous and destructive, and they treat sex and erotic acts with suspicion. However, in this study, sex, though adventuresome, is not negative; it is a positive necessity proving the heterosexual masculinity of the men pictured in the ads. The ads in this study feature what appear to be unmarried heterosexuals engaging in sexual acts for pleasure, leisure, and adventure, going against Rubin's erotic hierarchy where marital, reproductive sex between one man and one woman is supreme. On the other hand, while this kind of advertising sex is ostensibly unmarried and not procreative, it is reflective of the patriarchal order in which women are possessions.

Two points are worth considering here, then. First, women's sexuality, like the natural wilderness men are enticed to conquer and master, has always been a dangerous yet attractive thing. It also has always been a thing to contain. If Rubin (1984) suggests that women's sexuality has historically been contained by marriage to a man, then the exemplars suggest a powerful man outside of marriage can contain it as well. Second, in the ads' logic, the requirement of a sexual woman to prove heterosexual masculinity speaks to contemporary fears of homosexuality. As long as homosexuality was closeted as taboo, a man had little to fear that his masculinity would be read as homosexual because the presumption was heterosexual unless otherwise signified. But today one cannot as easily presume heterosexuality as in the past. Hence, while manhood may be

required to signify its masculine dominance in the world, now heterosexual manhood is required to signify itself the only way that it can—through sex with a woman. If women reject this role, whether for sexual preference or political strategy, heterosexual manhood loses its power to signify itself as currently defined. In a sense, then, the exemplar ads' emphasis on heterosexual sex not only signifies the presence of an absent homosexuality (the elephant in the room) but also ties women to an even more restricted role as heterosexual signifier. Moreover, the prospect of a generation of young men "buying" this rhetorical message along with consequences for women is terrifying.

Rubin (1984) argues that "one of the more tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way" (p. 283). According to the visual messages suggested in these five exemplars, if sex is not just for married couples anymore, it remains just for heterosexual couples. Furthermore, the sex featured in these ads does not take place in a domestic setting as Rubin's hierarchy predicts. Rubin notes that marital, reproductive, and heterosexual sex typically takes place in the "private sphere" of one's home for procreating the nuclear family. The sexual situations in this study are outside the private bedrooms of the domesticated nuclear family home, unless we read the Banana Republic ad's hotel room as a domestic bedroom. The Rockport shower seems unlikely to be in the family home, as well; one can imagine bathing with shoes only in more public showers, at the dock or the campground. Yet these sexually charged scenes also seem void of the traditionally "public" spaces where men flaunt their power and authority. No public podiums, offices, or boardrooms appear in these ads. The spaces in the ads are not domesticated, but they are not public either. The scenes of

mastery—and sex—seem either purposely vague, as with Banana Republic, Rockport, and David Yurman, or purposely “wild” and uninhabited, as with Calvin Klein and Sketchers. In any case, sex occurs neither in the marital bed nor in the corner office. These advertising men are freed from the responsibilities of family and career.

So it would be a mistake to interpret these ads’ attitudes toward sex as progressive. Krasses, Bauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003), as well as Bordo (1999), argue that for the last 30 years the mass media have tried to dictate sexuality in increasingly narrow ways. The exemplar ads suggest that there are many adventurous ways and places to have sex, and that it is not reserved for the married husband and wife alone. They also suggest that women are sexually active, neither virginal prudes nor passively available whores. However, these ads also reemphasize the heterosexual man and woman as representing “gender normative” sexual activity in an unmistakable gender hierarchy where women are the losers, and active sex for women continues to defer to dominant heterosexual men. This most likely can be attributed to the magazines in which the ads were found since the magazines market themselves to young adult heterosexual men. And, if ads signify some segment of society’s beliefs through hyper-ritualized representations of reality, as Goffman (1976) argues, then the ads in this study suggest that we continue to reserve sex for one man and one woman.

At the same time, the exemplars demonstrate some interesting twists on advertising conventions. The ads not only show undressed women, but also undressed men, as in the ads by David Yurman, Calvin Klein, and Rockport. These undressed men also are cropped in ways similar to the ways contemporary visual culture objectifies

women's bodies by atomizing them into discrete parts, usually erotic or sexual parts, as Kilbourne (1979, 1987) has demonstrated. However, this practice of robbing women's body parts of their agency and humanity takes on a wholly different meaning when applied to the bodies of men. Rather than objectifying men, I argue that the cropped, headless men in the present study serve a different function, not as the objects of desire for heterosexual masculine viewers, but as mirrors inviting the heterosexual man as the ad's viewer to identify with the ad. Unlike cropped objectified images of women, the cropped men retain their agency in the narratives and their power over women, as well. So, while women may be sexually active in these seemingly "new" visual logics, they remain the objects possessed (if not desired) by heterosexual men. And, while men's bodies may be forced into unrealistic ideals of naked masculinity that are difficult for real men to achieve, men remain the viewers, not the viewed, in these ads. After all, as Berger (1972) shows, men do not just "appear" as women do, men "act" (p. 47), and men continue to control the contours of the active gaze.

Persuasive advertising containing sexual narratives are not uncommon (Lambiase & Riechert, 2003). According to Krasses, Bauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003), certain types of men's magazines even show evidence of hegemonic masculine communication systems and gendered speech. As in research done by Krasses, Bauwkamp, and Wesselink (2003), the women featured in the ads of this thesis remain the focus of Mulvey's (1975, 1981, 1989) male gaze. Though the visuals suggest the women are sexually assertive, the male gaze commodifies the women, presenting their bodies—and sex with those bodies—not only as equivalent to consumable products but also as objects

to be possessed in order to signify heterosexual masculinity. In contrast, the men in these advertisements have an identity other than a sexual one: traveler and writer of letters, outdoorsman with quality shoes, driver of motorcycle, hero under siege on a glacier, and refined man of taste in jewelry. This is consistent with traditional research on gender advertisements (Krasses, Bawkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; Goffman, 1976). In effect, men “get sex” as consequence of who they are, while women “seek sex” with powerful men because of who they are, and women’s sexual pleasure is secondary—or perhaps not at issue at all.

Kilbourne believes that advertising is a key U.S. storyteller (Jhally, 2000). If this is true, then the persuasive sexual images and gender messages in fashion advertisements found in men’s magazines should be a concern for all. The ads in this study make an old heterosexual gender story seem new, progressive, and exciting. But the plot has not changed. Ethical considerations for such advertising are challenging if we wish to open up rather than close down the possibilities for men, women, gender, and sexuality—in all their forms. But Henthorne and LaTour (1994) argue, “As the ethical considerations of society change over time, what is considered appropriate and acceptable in advertising must also change” (p. 88). According to Jaggar (1991), feminist moral codes challenge traditional western ethics that undervalue and degrade women’s moral experiences; feminist ethics attempt to modify, reformulate, or reorganize thinking, symbolism, and material culture. Feminist ethics ask questions about power and look to create a moral philosophy that generates non-sexist moral ideologies and practices. The stereotypical and negative depictions of both sexes found in the ads in this study reinforce patriarchal principles where men are more powerful than women. In the case of these

advertisements, applying feminist ethics further demonstrates the gender inequality pictured in this study's ads by underlining the fact that advertising practices that promote such images perpetuate women's subordination. As Jaggar (1991) suggests, studies like this one must be voiced not only to articulate moral critiques of such images, but also to "prescribe morally justifiable ways of resisting such actions and practices; and...envision morally desirable alternatives that will promote women's emancipation" (p. 98).

Jaggar (1991) also argues that capitalism, racism, imperialism, male dominance, and the traditional nuclear family are all part of an established system. While Ewen and Ewen (1992) contend that visual communication, especially through advertising, represents a cultural language. This thesis argues that the visual rhetorics of the five exemplar advertisements work as a persuasive language intended to convince men as viewers that culturally masculine traits like independence, autonomy, separation, and reason are still superior and preferable to culturally feminine traits like interdependence, connection, and emotion. This thesis then suggests that the visual rhetorics in the five advertisements work as persuasive messaging that attempts to sell ideal normal representations of gender and sexuality. In terms of advertising and consumer culture, it is significant that brand and product have been gendered into a hierarchy that shadows symbolic and material relations between women and men. Equally significant, this gender alignment of brand/man that possesses product/woman not only echoes a time when women were chattel but also commodifies relations between men and women, including sexual ones, in an imagined ideal normal world inhabited by only one man and one woman who will not make eye contact with each other.

## Chapter Nine

### Conclusion

Early U.S. women's magazines, using illustrations, short stories, and advertisements, defined the new woman for the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kitch, 1998). A century later, in the present study, five ads pulled from men's magazines define a new man for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in doing so define women's role within an idealized masculine world. In this heterosexual masculine world, a man dominates his personal landscape, including his possessions and the women in it, while he maintains both economic and personal freedom. Women, in this heterosexually masculine *mis en scene*, function as essential commodities for authenticating heterosexual manhood. Scholars have argued that media may define or even sell gender (Kacen, 2000; McCracken, 1993), and previous research demonstrates the ways women are often portrayed in advertising as objects of sexual desire (Baker, 2005; MacKay & Covell, 1997; Reichert & Carpenter 2004; Reichert et al., 1999). Ads in the present study, however, symbolically represent women as must-have accessories, interchangeable with fashion apparel, for signifying heterosexual masculinity. Although the objectification and commodification of women in mass media is not a new idea, the representation of women in consumer culture as possessions that *prove* heterosexual masculinity is an idea new to mass communications scholarship.

The visual rhetoric in the fashion advertisements for this study, with the exception of Rockport, does not promote commodity features and benefits, or even the specific products per se. Superficially, these are brand image advertisements, more interested in positioning the characteristics of the brand as desirable. On closer examination, however, the advertisements gender both brand and product by aligning man with the brand's ownership of product and by aligning woman with the purchased, owned, and consumed product itself. In doing so, the ads invite the young men targeted to read the ads to step into a corporate-branded fantasy world that caters to carefree adventure with no responsibilities beyond enjoying the moment, including the availability of sex with beautiful women.

Indeed, in the frozen narrative moments of the exemplars, while the men clearly have access to sex with beautiful women, it is not always clear that the men want it. In the ads for Banana Republic, Calvin Klein, David Yurman, and Sketchers, the visual clues of proximity and body language suggest the men are nonchalant if not ambivalent about their sexual desire. At the same time, in the Calvin Klein, David Yurman, and Sketchers exemplars, the women seem to have no choice but to be driven by their sexual desire. In the sexual dynamics of all the exemplars except the Sketchers ad, the men are self-possessed and in control of the sexual moment. Yet, even in the Sketchers ad, visual clues tell readers that the Sketchers man ultimately can physically dominate the Sketchers woman—if he so chooses. This formula in the exemplars communicates control, thus choices, for the men and an ever-present possibility of humiliation for the women. At the same time, the ads suggest that the brands, thus men, are masculine and powerful and products thus women are subordinate to the needs and whims of both brand and men. In



short, the ads grant the brand/man a free will, sovereignty, and liberty denied to product/woman—a very old gender story, indeed.

As to what this visual rhetoric *does*, I argue that it functions to rescue and recuperate white heteronormative masculinity. This recuperation is occurring during a historical moment when not only women's movement and feminism seem to threaten the social and material preeminence of white heterosexual manhood but also a more open discourse about and material action for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights and culture. In the cultural mythos of heterosexual white manhood, as well as in the exemplar ads, real men, even metro-sexual ones, do not have to work to make their bodies sexually attractive by adorning themselves with fashion. Their sexual appeal is defined by their power over and status in their social and material worlds. We can imagine that if this power and status were threatened, the white heterosexual masculine mythos may take on greater significance. Thus, fashion advertising targeting young adult men, even those with a penchant for consumer culture, may tap into this threat to white heterosexual masculinity by reinforcing the myth of white heterosexual masculine supremacy. Within the current social and cultural context, the exemplar ads, while ethically repugnant, become comprehensible.

Because the visual rhetoric of the exemplars is accomplished at the expense of women and non-heterosexuals, it is regressive. Moreover, if women are subordinated to men in the exemplar ads, then homophobia is the elephant in the room of each exemplar ad's fantasy, particularly when considered in light of the feminizing potential of the self-grooming definition of the metro-sexual lifestyle and of fashion consumption. Remove the women from the exemplars and the ads' sexual landscapes become more ambiguous

in sexual orientation. Without the women, the men as main characters in the ads' brand fantasies are no longer clearly heterosexual. Perhaps ironically, then, while the ads' visual rhetoric connotes masculine power and control regardless of sexual orientation, the men's sexual nonchalance and ambivalence toward the women in some of the ads connotes something else. We might conclude then that in the symbolic order of the exemplars, signifying masculinity only requires power and control, but signifying *heterosexual* masculinity requires the presence of a subordinated but sexually aroused woman. The arrogance of such a fragile heterosexual masculinity would be humorous if the consequences for women were not so serious, since the symbolic order grants heterosexual masculinity the right to define women for its purpose, and the power to keep her yoked to that purpose.

According Hoagland (1991), heterosexuality or heterosexism is not just a label for a way of life or type of relationship involving a man and a woman. Instead, she argues that heterosexism provides a model for heterosexual masculinity and femininity. So any contemporary discussion of feminism would do well to consider the ways that heteronormativity plays into the status of women. Hoagland (1991) writes:

Heterosexualism is men dominating and de-skilling women in any number of forms...it is a way of living that normalizes the dominance of one person in a relationship and the subordination of another. As a result it undermines the female agency. (p. 29)

In the exemplars, heterosexual masculinity is a detached and effortless mastery of the material and social world. Heterosexual femininity is an aggressively seductive even dangerous threat that challenges heterosexual masculinity if it is not controlled and

contained by the masculine master. The women's agency is limited to the pursuit of sex with men who dictate not only the terms of the (hetero)sexual relationship, but also the material and social world at large. The potential for abuse in such an order should be apparent but too often is not, even as we gloss over its manifestations in the daily flow of news about brutality, abuse, neglect, and violence against women, children, and minorities.

If advertising can be described as a kind of cultural call and response to social discourse, then I would argue that the exemplar ads are responding to a historical moment of perceived vulnerability for the social and cultural dominance of heterosexual white men. Using women, often sexually, to shore up heterosexual masculinity is not news. In the exemplar ads, if the women were absent, the ads' visual rhetoric would continue to position men as dominant and in control of their social worlds. The only purpose women serve in these ads is to make the men in the ads straight, and that may be news. Furthermore, the idea of brand as straight man is new and worth pursuing further.

This thesis contributes to a thin literature that examines sex in advertising as visual rhetoric as well as a thin literature on men's magazines, including the newer metro-sexual genre. This kind of scholarship also contributes to a historiography of the representation of women in the media and the media's normalization of gender ideologies. One strength of this thesis is a consistency of findings across all five exemplar ads: First, brand and product in advertising have been gendered into a heteronormative hierarchy. Second, the ads are selling men not so much just the promise of sex with women, but instead sex with women as proof of heterosexual masculinity,

which requires the subordination of women as heterosexual signifiers. These are new twists on familiar themes in the literature on sex in advertising.

The limited scope of this thesis is an obvious weakness. First, despite the consistency of findings, five fashion advertisements is a limited number from which to draw conclusions let alone generalize to a trend. The themes found here require more systematic scrutiny in other product categories of advertising and in other kinds of advertising vehicles and genres. Second, while discussion of heteronormativity is important and valuable in the present case, it must be remembered that these exemplars were chosen *because* they included sexualized images of women, which automatically implicates heterosexuality since the ads were drawn from men's magazines. We can assume that sexualized images of women appearing in men's magazines are meant for heterosexual men. I have "stacked the deck" in a very real sense with important consequences. While I can make claims about the *kind* of heteronormativity represented by these five advertisements, I cannot make claims about heteronormativity, or its cultural representation, beyond these five ads.

Regarding my methodology, Mullen and Fisher's (2004) streamlined adaptation of Sonja Foss' approach to visual rhetorical analysis proved to be an effective though somewhat cumbersome analytic procedure. Further refinements to the method might include more holistically combining the analysis of visual elements with the analysis of connotative and denotative meaning because both processes during the current study led to the same kinds of conclusions. The similarity of findings in both steps might be considered a further strength of the study. But it resulted in a somewhat awkward and redundant reporting, although the redundancies across visual elements and

connotative/denotative meaning may be a characteristic of the exemplar ads rather than the method itself.

Further research building on this thesis might include a more systematic look at the sexual visual rhetoric in fashion advertising in men's magazines using quantitative content analysis, as well as additional studies using rhetorical, qualitative, and critical approaches to the representation of women, men, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, it would be important to pursue further examination of advertising for the symbolic gendering of brand and product. Further research also ought to include more demographic diversity of representation as well and be qualified for age, race, ethnicity, and class. This would assist in determining if and how the kinds of gender messages in the exemplar ads vary across different demographic groups.

Furthermore, my original study (Ford, 2006) did find evidence of homoerotic themes among the 152 fashion ads from which I extracted the five exemplar ads, even though the magazines in which all the ads appeared supposedly encourage heterosexual lifestyles using heteronormative sexual content (Ford, 2006; Kolbe & Albanese, 1996; Krasses, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; McRee & Denham, 2006). That observation about the presence of homoerotic themes in my original study when combined with the implied homophobia in the exemplar ads of the present study beg further investigation into relationships between more open though still highly contested contemporary discourses about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender sexualities, and what the exemplar ads hint could be a heterosexual backlash. How then do mainstream discourse, news, popular culture, and advertising organize and represent this discursive moment, along with the various stakeholders?

Last, two additional areas of future research require human subjects: reception studies on the ways audiences read and interpret this kind of visual sexual rhetoric and qualitative fieldwork on the ways advertising creatives understand and intend the visual sexual rhetoric they produce. If the literature on audience reception is scarce, the literature on professional practices regarding advertising's creative content is non-existent. Yet, as the encoding professional sources of such rhetoric, the people in advertising's creative professions remain an important area of study if we are to have any hope of reversing sexism and heterosexism in professional practices.

We can think of the exemplar ads as a small biopsy of contemporary culture, revealing a view that man remains the dominant figure in importance and power relative to woman. The ads classically define masculinity and femininity in heterosexist, patriarchal, and racially prejudiced terms within a capitalist consumer society that requires each person to participate, but distributes its privileges disproportionately. Heterosexual white men are granted the agency to accumulate wealth and to define leisure as unattached adventure including sexual adventure, while women, although sexually insistent, function as accessorizing trophies to men. This cancer, however, is a new strain revealing white masculine homophobic fears, which, if left unchecked, promise severe consequences for women and non-heterosexuals. Shoring up the primacy of white heterosexual men requires reinforcing current inequities and the prospect of even more restrictive symbolic, cultural, social, institutional, legal, and economic practices and policies for everyone else.

U.S. femininity has been commodified for at least a century. It is likely that U.S. masculinity, although an understudied and relatively new research area, has been

increasingly commodified as well. Beyond identifying and counting such practices in research and scholarship, visual rhetoric can help us unlock the mechanics of their persuasiveness and, hopefully, rebuild a more ethical visual culture. Whatever the method, documenting and understanding subtle social and cultural changes and their accompanying cultural contexts may help researchers understand not only why such images still exist but also why they are so widely tolerated. Kacen (2000) notes that postmodern society is obsessed with appearance and consumption; fashion, thus fashion advertising, brings both of these obsessions together seamlessly. I would argue that appearances as visual rhetoric in consumer culture run deeper than adorning the material body.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Banana Republic

Copies of each ad reviewed in this study are included in this paper. While some fashion companies granted permission to reprint the advertisements, others were unresponsive. Every effort was made to gain permission to replicate the visual material before this paper was completed. If any appropriate acknowledgement has not been noted, the researcher invites copyright holders to make the oversight known.



As usual,  
the postcards  
he wrote  
were still in their luggage.

BANANA REPUBLIC



Appendix B: Calvin Klein



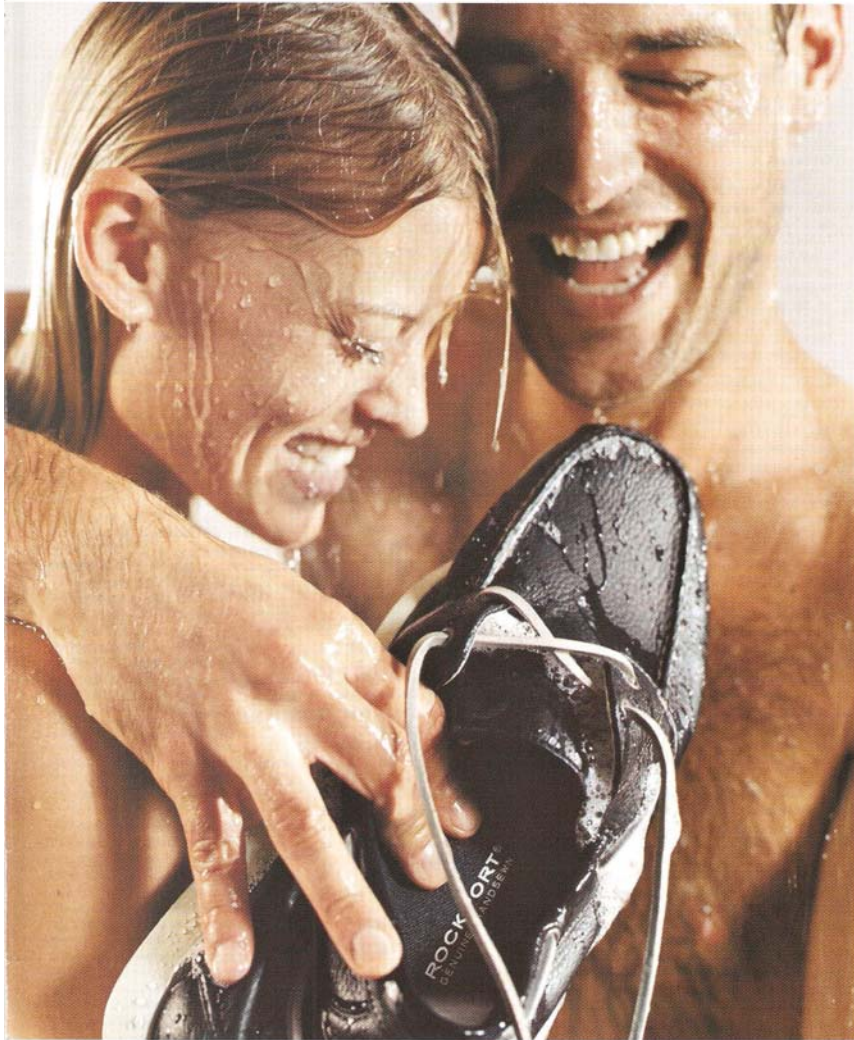


Appendix C: David Yurman



*Reproduced with permission.*

Appendix D: Rockport



WASH THEM UP

SHOES AND BARE SKIN ARE MEANT TO GO TOGETHER. ROCKPORT'S SOAP-AND-WATER WASHABLE BOAT SHOES KEEP THAT RELATIONSHIP FROM TURNING SOUR. THE ROCKPORT EXPERIENCE. COMFORT, TECHNOLOGY. YOU'VE NEVER FELT SO GREAT.

AVAILABLE AT SELECT MACY'S



ROCKPORT



Appendix E: Sketchers

