

SEX, GENDER AND ADS: ANALYSING VISUAL IMAGES AND THEIR SOCIAL EFFECTS

Zara Pinto-Coelho, Department of Communication Sciences, University of Minho
zara@ics.uminho.pt

Silvana Mota-Ribeiro¹, Department of Communication Sciences, University of Minho
silvanar@ics.uminho.pt

ABSTRACT

Our paper aims to identify the visual strategies by which heterosexist discourses are (re)produced in display ads published in women's magazines, in ways which may be transformative as well as reproductive of the western hetero-gendered hegemonic order. The visual workings are approached from a social semiotic point of view, and analysed according Kress and van Leeuwen's system of analysis (1996).

I. INTRODUCTION

Sexuality and gender have always been useful tools in persuasive communication. In an attempt to appeal to consumers, the majority of commercial images reproduces the norm of heterosexual sex-gender-desire continuity, and produces ideal feminine women and ideal masculine men. While numerous content analysis and semiotic studies were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s to demonstrate the extent of gender stereotyping in advertising, no such scale of research has been carried out focusing on visual representations of normative heterosexuality, and on its differential solicitation of female and male viewers.

Recent work in gender theory demonstrates that gender and sexuality are dynamic, interrelated social practices, rather than static, immutable, and separate categories (Connell, 1987; Butler, 1990). Sexuality is a central site of expression, enactment, and acquisition of femininity, as well as masculinity. Ways of doing and being a "woman" or a "man" are grounded on western societies' dominant beliefs, attitudes and values about sexuality, typically on an ideological system sometimes called heterosexism. How is this sex-gender system encoded on display advertisements? How do visual representations of heterosexuality interweave with representations of masculinity and femininity that keep women in their places? These questions entail that the focus of our analysis is on the visual co-constructions of ways of doing or being a hetero woman and a hetero man in heterosexual practices within particular hetero-gendered orders.

II. VISUAL IMAGES, GENDER, SEX AND ADS

Our starting point is a view of visual communication as a multifunctional social activity, according to which the use of visual signs serves to constitute representations of the world (ideational function), social interactions between the viewer of the image and the producer (interactional function), and representations of the visual constructness of the world (compositional function), and fulfil these metafunctions simultaneously. In a social approach to images, the constitutive power of images is affected by the social place of producers and viewers of images. This means that according to our approach, the production and the viewing of visual signs is motivated social actions, that is, they are circumscribed and made possible by an array of contextual factors. Consequently, analysing visual images means to approach them as tools of power and control, as well as instruments of social construction of reality.

Ever since the birth of women's liberation movement in the 1960s feminists considered commercials as a fruitful field to examine cultural values, beliefs and myths related to gender and sexuality. It is by now a familiar finding, reported by many studies, that since the mid-1990s advertising imagery of sexuality and

¹ Partially funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology, of the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (POCI 2010 – SFR/BD/22705/2005).

gender has become more varied, and that, on the side of reception there are multiple ways of “reading against the grain”. According to van Zoonen (1994), advertising practices are one of the sites of our consumer culture where discursive negotiation over the sex-gender system takes place. Gender and sex should thus be conceived as part of ongoing historical process by which subjects are constructed, and not as a fixed property of individuals, and advertising practices should be understood as playing an active part on this process. Display ads which feature female and male models may draw upon existing discourses of heterosexuality, while interacting with, and being mediated by other dominant discourses to produce powerful and new ways of conceptualizing the issue. In so doing, discourses hook into normative ideas and common-sense notions about masculinity, or femininity, or sexuality (for instance, that heterosexuality is natural and normal, that heterosexuality is superior to other forms of sexual orientation and expression, and thus that homosexuality is abnormal and deviant, that sexuality is natural and/or biologically determined). These beliefs produce shortcut paths into ideas which convey messages about good and bad sexualities, acceptable and inappropriate behaviours and relationships. Therefore, beliefs about heterosexuality become naturalized in common sense with the effect that heterosexual relationships are taken for granted as the norm.

It is truth that commercial imagery is a heterogeneous visual world, allowing different ways of encoding and decoding. However, one should not think that this discursive agency is unconstrained. The nature of this process is circumscribed by the characteristic features of the advertising genre. The main purpose of advertisers is, as we know, to persuade people to buy products. To do this they have to build an “image” for the product being advertised, by bringing into action a range of discourses. At the same time, advertisers need to situate the viewer or consumer in a particular way vis-à-vis a world of dreams and themselves. And they also have to convey meanings within limited space and time. They will therefore exploit familiar societal symbols. Heterosexuality seems to be one of the main vehicles used to evoke desire and identification. The conjunction of these discourses into a coherent whole, for example, a heterosexist one, can be seen as an effect of an ideological attitude that underpins the activation of discourses in ads (Kress, 1985). Besides the constraint of meanings, advertisers also have to deal with the particular demands of forms within this particular genre. For example, its particular hyper-ritualized nature, which implies the use of a specific visual modality, that make the depicted elements seem more than real, due to an appeal to “sensory qualities”: texture, colour, “feel”. In spite of all these constraints, advertisers can still innovate by going against the grain, we figure. The production of visual signs is an active and transformative act, just like viewing an image is. Viewers may refuse to go along with certain representations and reject them as wrong or false. However, we also believe that the power of the viewer, as well as the power of the producer, is limited by the forms of visual text. Display ads involve, therefore, complex mechanisms and practices and for that reason must be carefully analysed.

III. METHOD

A total of 27 display advertisements were collected from six monthly women’s magazines, published in Portugal, in April 2006. All advertisements depicting at least one woman and one man were selected and analysed using the criteria outlined as follows.

We looked at the discursive functioning of ads from three interrelated points of view: the representational point of view, that aimed to show which were the visual means through which a particular version of heterosexuality is established, and that at some time create an image to the products being advertised - we also wanted to make explicit the normative beliefs about (hetero)sexuality that were implied or suggested by these constructions; the interactional point of view, identifying the visual means through which this ideal version of heterosexuality implicates women and men in different ways; and the compositional point of view, which took into account the ways the depicted elements were interrelated with each other, and their interactional meaning connotations, that is, how they contributed to define who the viewer is and how she or he should engage with the participants depicted in images. The data indicated a predominance of advertisements displaying a heterosexual monogamous couple and a predominance of conceptual processes in images. Due to lack of space, we have decided to focus our analysis on three different ways of encoding

heterosexual discourses in visual images and of persuasively conveying them. The first strategy is *the unification of heterosexuality* through conceptual processes, the second is *the narrativization of heterosexuality* through action processes, and the third one is the *genderization of heterosexuality* through interactional processes. These three visual strategies definitions of heterosexuality results from various structures and elements of images within which meanings are encoded, which where analysed: human represented participants (and their appearance), actions, props, settings, gaze of the participants, the size of frame (close, medium or long shot), point of view (the angle from which the participant is “seen” by the assumed viewer), composition and modality.

IV – RESULTS

VISUAL STRATEGY 1 - UNIFICATION OF HETEROSEXUALITY



FIGURE I



This first strategy involves the construction of a symbol of unit – the monogamous heterosexual couple – through which hetero women and hetero men are held together in a collective identity, irrespective of their differences and divisions. This process implies an essentialization of heterosexuality, that is, its construction as a fixed attribute or identity, as a part of being a female or a male. In visual terms, this strategy is coded through a multidimensional structure of interwoven conceptual classificational and analytical processes. In other words, through a choice to represent heterosexuality as a matter of being and as matter of possessing specific female and male attributes, rather than in terms of a practice or of something that women and men do as a performance. How is this performed visually?

Images show predominantly two human represented participants: one woman sided by one man (or vice-versa), posing for the photographer. They are simply there (sitting or standing), for no apparent reason other than to display themselves to the viewer. The focus is on its existence, its presence. No action is indicated and there is not a setting. By being shown “in a void” the represented participants become generic, a “typical example” rather than particular, located or time-specific; this is what lends symbolic qualities to the couple. The abstractness of this representation establishes the heterosexual couple not as “a couple”, among others, but as a typical couple, functioning as an emblem of ideal heterosexuality: a monogamous couple, one man to one woman, and vice-versa. Modality is another visual structure that reinforces this representational effect, since it is the socially conventionalized realism or credibility of images. Neutral, flat, blurred backgrounds, abstracted from details, as well as the illumination, the “mood” of the image, chromatic reduction, are the most important visual resources that lower modality and give the depicted couple a timeless essence.

Heterosexuality is represented as the coming together of complementary essential qualities of women and men to form an ideal, harmonious whole. This is realised through the symmetry of the represented participants and compositional balance, namely by their visual weight, as well as by their body movements, one towards the other, either touching each other or not. Women and men are symmetrically distributed across the picture space, and shown in equal size, so that the viewer perceives their similarities as typical members of the same category. Other visual signs that evoke the idea of heterosexual complementarities, sharing qualities and belonging to the same class – the class of heterosexuals – are the appearance, body shapes, clothes, social class, age and ethnicity of the represented participants. We know represented women and men are heterosexual not just because of visual cues, such as feminine or masculine clothes, but because

that sort of appearance is related to certain assumptions about hetero females, and males, especially their relation to gender.

This means that underlying this categorization, based on similarity, there is another one, based on gender and sex differences, visually translated in a combination of a visibly feminine woman and a visibly masculine man. In images, this is realised through conceptual analytical processes, which are about the way participants *fit together* to make up a larger whole. Women and men are shown as parts (“possessive attributes”) of a whole, the couple, which is the “Carrier”. At the same time, women and men are themselves “carriers” of several “possessive attributes”, which create a male-female differentiation/polarization. Visually this is done through the representation of body shapes, appearances and clothes, and gestuality, which function as important signifiers of difference and identity. The feminine bodies are delicate and of soft shapes, whereas the masculine bodies are provided with more angular shapes, and they are dressed up in a feminine or masculine way, although the traits of feminine and masculine looks are no longer those of classic and traditional femininity and masculinity. The visual concept of femininity and masculinity as separate entities is also created by compositional symmetry or quasi-symmetry – she is placed on one side, and he is placed on the other side, to the left or to the right -, which suggest a “women versus men” binary opposition, and that anyone is either one thing or the other.

VISUAL STRATEGY 2 – NARRATIVIZATION OF HETEROSEXUALITY

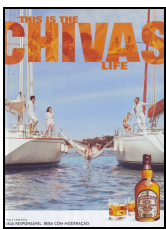


FIGURE II



These are the kind of ads where advertisers make the choice of representing heterosexuality as something that women and men *do*, as a transaction, and not as an attribute. What kind of transactions are depicted and who is represented as playing the active roles of doing and/or looking and who plays the passive roles of being acted upon and/or being looked at, in the transactions depicted, constitute our main questions. It is at this level of visual functioning that the gender asymmetry is probably more visible, although we did not find the classic format reproduced - female passivity *versus* male activity- in a very explicit way.

Narrative representations are recognized by the presence of a vector, connecting participants, which expresses a “doing” or “happening” kind of relation. In our sample of narrative images, the human represented participants are one woman and one man (exception is made to a group of teenagers, and there is also a group consisting of three couples that, mainly by means of composition, are clearly shown as so) and they are depicted as involved in activities related with sexuality and romance and with leisure activities, also represented within the scope of a romantic relationship (only one image does not refer to this reality).

Interactional processes consisting of body touching, embracing, holding hands, kissing are predominant. But there are also vectors formed by eye lines, facial expression and poses. They express affection between the represented participants and intimate contact, relating women and men in a way that evokes the field of seduction or reinforce a romantic atmosphere. Settings, as well as issues of modality (colour saturation, illumination) are also important visual signifiers for romantic fantasy and vary from paradisiacal and fantasist hyper-reality represented as real, to “less than real” blurred or flat backgrounds. They contribute to a construction of a heterosexual couples’ life as something perfect and sometimes more romantic than sexual.

There are, as it would be expected, images that presuppose an erotic/sexual encounter yet to happen or happening in the image. Actions such as kissing, looking passionately and touching breast, as well as poses, facial expressions, and open lips can be seen as visual indicators of sexual connotations. Even so, semiotic

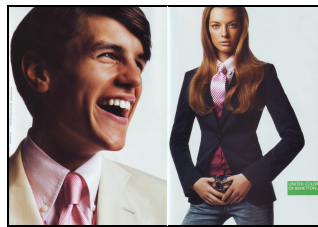
features such as settings, clothes (though one image shows a bit of nudity) and bodily action in these ads create narratives that encourage a romantic view of heteronormative sexuality.

As far as romantic or erotic transactions are concerned, men are more represented as doers and women as the ones acted upon; some more “classical” situations still occur, such as an image where his body is above hers and another one where he takes the action of touching her and she just makes her body available to him, gaining pleasure with it. Poses, facial expressions and body salience in images indicate that women are more frequently shown as appearing than doing. However, women’s gaze in some images, as well as body movement and appearance can be interpreted as some female assertiveness, as well as the action of kissing a man, in one of the images. On the other hand, some compositional features, such as placement, visual weight and salience may signify more symmetrical sexual roles.

As to visual images dealing with leisure or similar activities, where romantic/erotic features are not always explicitly present, the small amount of this kind of images does not allow to reach definite conclusions. However, it seems that some visual features are used to indicate a tendency to male action or male dominance. Settings and props that have a masculine connotation are used in these images. Boats and cars are indicators of traditional masculinity. Men are compositionally more connected to these objects or dominate them in terms of action, with their hands and arms. Also, men are depicted as more actional: when, for instance, a couple is simply walking, he takes the lead.

VISUAL STRATEGY 3 - GENDERIZATION OF HETEROSEXUALITY

FIGURE III



In this section, we answer questions concerning the way in which the producer of image and viewer of image are placed socially, which affects both what the image is about, and its reading and uses. In a social semiotic approach viewing an image entails first being located in a particular social way by and in relation to the image, that is, images design the position of the viewer.

The analysis of conceptual and narrative images shows that the version of heterosexuality constituted by ads is represented for or to the female viewer in a way which implies a stronger prescription for women. That is, in a way that makes the norm - the heterosexual monogamous couple - an heavier duty to women than to men, revealing an underlying heterosexist position or attitude. The viewer is defined as a female that wants to look like the woman in the advertisement, and that should desire to be a part of a heterosexual monogamous couple. Images position the viewer as a woman, who aspires to a lifestyle that includes necessarily an attractive body and (to) a male partner in a monogamous couple relationship.

The image act, whether pictures demand something from the viewer or offer the viewer something, is crucial, as well as what the images want from the viewer and what is being offered. Some of our ads depict represented participants gazing directly at the viewer. They are demand ads. In our sample, women are visually represented as demanding from the viewer an imaginary social response more than men. The viewer is interpellated by the gaze of the female part of the heterosexual couple. In fact, in all demanding pictures women are the ones gazing at the viewer (only one ad shows a man gazing directly at the viewer- it is a public figure-, but accompanied by a woman who also does so). These women say “look at me”. They invite the viewer to look at their bodies and they ask to be constructed as an object to be looked at. In these images, many of them without an action or a setting, a demand to be looked at by the female part of the couple means to demand “look at my perfect, thin and young body”, “be like me”.

Even when the image acts as offers (and the female gaze is not directed at the viewer), the visual construction of the feminine essence is based more on appearance than the masculine one. This is signified through facial expressions and gestures of represented women – seductive expression and poses that make the body more salient -, as well as by the horizontal angle from which women are seen by the viewer. The female participants are pictured as more involved with the viewer, their body shapes are made more visible; they are shown closer to the viewer and they are made more salient through colour and illumination.

Represented women gazing at the viewer demand another thing from the viewer. They also ask to be looked at as a member of a happy heterosexual couple, a role model highly valued in the culture of the magazine, and hence also with the promise of that role. Either women smile seductively, inviting the viewer to enter a relationship of social affinity, to identify with that kind of heterosexual women, or stare coldly, constructing a relationship of unequal power, in which heterosexual relations are presented as something ideal, above the viewer, which he or she aspires to. In these images the viewer is placed in the position of someone that should want the type of heterosexual relation that is imposed “from above”. This has the effect of representing the heterosexual couple above the viewer, as something that all the viewers of these images should see as a goal to reach. The angles are low, which means the relationship between the interactive participants is depicted as one in which the represented participant has power over the viewer. Issues of modality are also important, since lowered modality means that the couple is depicted as less “real”, “as what might be”, as a promise, a possibility and an ideal. This is established in images through colour desaturation, or oversaturation, as well as colour reduction, decontextualization (flat or blurred backgrounds), soft focus, and illumination. The placement of the human participants who incarnate heterosexuality, in the upper half of the composition (space of the ideal) and the product in the lower half (space of the real) contributes to the understanding of the monogamous couple relationship this way.

Images also depict this type of relationship as more socially demanding for women than men. This is done by the articulation of representation, as well as compositional and intractional aspects. Women’s clothes, facial expressions and poses are made to attract the viewers’ attention; their bodies are frequently made more salient by receiving the greatest amount of light and by their placement closer to the viewer, which increases identification and affinity. Also, horizontal angles (women are represented more frontally) and gaze, as we have seen, are semiotic resources that construct the relationship between the viewer and the represented female as more involved and close. Men are shown as more involved in the represented heterosexual situation, whereas women are represented as more involved in the social dimension of heterosexuality, thus presenting it as more determinant for her.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We do not claim there is a single reading here, and that this form of analysis provides access to it. Compulsory heterosexuality is a “negotiated terrain”. The actual female viewer might respond by placing herself within the normalized ideal of heterosexuality, but the fit is never perfect. She may even reject it as wrong or false, because this ideal is constructed from a male point of view and/or because is rooted in normative exclusion of certain sexed identifications. Viewers are to some extent free to construct images in a way closer to their own discursive position. How this tension is read and resolved by viewers will have to do with their social positioning and *habitus*. As we know, the concept of unproblematic compliant reading is a comforting myth for some of us, but it does not match actual practices.

VI. REFERENCES

- Butler, Judith (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London: Routledge.
- Connell, RW. (1987). Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kress, Gunther & Van Leeuwen, Theo (1996). Reading Images – The Grammar of Visual Design. London: Routledge.

Kress, Gunther (1985). "Discourses, Texts, Readers and the Pro-nuclear Arguments". In Chilton, Paul, Ed. Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate: Nukespeak Today, London: Frances Pinter, pp. 65-87.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (1994). Feminist Media Studies. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.