

Evolving Gender Roles in Media Discourse: A Semiotic Analysis of Kitchen Appliance Advertisements Across Eras

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of gender representation in kitchen appliance advertisements by comparing Kenwood campaigns from the 1940–1950s and the 21st century. While previous research has shown that advertising plays a critical role in shaping and reinforcing gender ideologies, less attention has been given to longitudinal comparisons across distinct socio-historical contexts. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996/2006) visual grammar framework, this study employs a qualitative analysis of both textual and visual elements in selected advertisements to uncover how gender roles are semiotically constructed. Findings reveal that mid-twentieth-century advertisements overwhelmingly positioned women as domestic caregivers and primary users of kitchen appliances, often subordinated to male authority figures. In contrast, the 2020 advertisement demonstrates a partial shift towards non-stereotypical gender role representation, emphasizing friendship, shared experiences, and the functional value of the product rather than gendered domestic obligations. Nevertheless, subtle hierarchies remain, with men portrayed as serious and focused actors, suggesting that stereotypes are being reconfigured rather than entirely dismantled. By situating these findings within broader debates on media influence, gender ideology, and cultural change, this article highlights how advertising reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards gender roles. The study contributes to scholarship on semiotics, media discourse, and gender representation, while underscoring the need for further research into contemporary advertising across diverse brands and digital platforms.

Keywords: gender representation, advertising discourse, semiotic analysis, kitchen appliance advertisements, media and ideology

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Knoll, Eisend, and Steinhagen (2011) argue that in recent years, the social roles of women and men in many Western societies have undergone significant shifts. Since the early 1970s, advertising scholars have examined how women and men are portrayed in media, as marketers often rely on consumer perceptions of gender roles to promote products and services (Zotos & Grau, 2016).

These portrayals, often referred to as *gender representation*, can be understood as the attribution of socially constructed roles to men and women. Vinacke (1957) conceptualised gender representation as beliefs embedded within social categories, in which communities prescribe specific roles to men and women.

Given the widespread reach of television and its influence on audience attitudes and expectations, advertisers have faced increasing criticism for their lack of sensitivity in reflecting evolving gender roles (Knoll et al., 2011). Against this backdrop, the objective of this study is to compare gender representation across advertisements.

Aim of study

The aim of this study is to compare the representation of gender roles in kitchen appliance advertisements from the 1940s–1950s and the 2020s to identify shifts in gender representation over time.

Research questions

1. What are the differences in gender representation between advertisements from the 1940s–1950s and those from the 21st century?
2. How do these gender roles reflect changing societal attitudes toward gender?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to analyse advertisements from two distinct periods: the 1940s–1950s and 2020.

Research sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select four Kenwood advertisements: three from the 1940s–1950s and one from 2020. Kenwood was chosen as it consistently markets kitchen appliances across decades, allowing for diachronic comparison of gender portrayals within the same product category. Although the sample size is limited, these advertisements capture contrasting socio-historical contexts and reflect broader advertising trends. Kitchen appliances, historically framed as “women’s work” (Holm et al., 2015), offer a productive lens through which to explore gender representation. Previous studies have demonstrated that products are often coded for male or female audiences (Espinar-Ruiz & González-Díaz, 2012; Parkins, 2006), making this corpus particularly relevant.

Data analysis

Data were analysed based on two (2) categories:

1. Visuals
2. Texts

Visual analysis focused on the representation of social actors, guided by Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Visual Grammar* framework (1996/2006), which examines social distance, social relation, and social interaction. This framework, which treats images as parallel to language in their capacity to convey meaning, was selected for its suitability in analysing stereotypical gender representation. Images not only depict events but also encode social relationships between participants (Sun, 2017).

Social distance refers to the proximity of actors to viewers, which shapes the level of intimacy conveyed. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, as cited in Marefat & Marzban, 2014), very close shots show only the face, close shots include head and shoulders, medium close shots capture waist up, medium shots show knee up, medium long shots include the full figure, and long shots situate actors within surrounding space.

Social relation pertains to the perceived power dynamics between actors and viewers, often conveyed through camera angle and eye-level positioning. Social interaction refers to gaze: a direct gaze demands the viewer’s attention, while an indirect gaze presents actors as objects of contemplation (Marefat & Marzban, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Kress and van Leeuwen's *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* explains how images construct meaning through representation and interaction with the viewer. Thuy (2017), in her review of the text, notes that Chapter 4 highlights how images "place the audience into a given position" by representing rather than enacting social relations (p. 167). Analytical attention is therefore given to gaze, framing, and viewing angle to understand how advertisements construct connections with viewers.

Across all four advertisements, the primary purpose is to promote Kenwood's Chef appliance as a labour-saving device. Actors are consistently framed in medium close shots, showing figures from head to waist. This framing communicates a moderate level of intimacy, appropriate for product promotion (Taib, 2010). More critically, the shot registers emotion, which naturalises gendered affective labour by inviting women viewers to identify with actors' domestic happiness and fulfilment.

The social relation across the advertisements is marked by eye-level shots, which place actors and viewers on the same plane. Frontal positioning further enhances audience engagement, producing a sense of inclusion. For instance, in advertisements 1 and 2, actors smile directly at the camera; the actress in advertisement 1 affectionately holds her presumed husband, while in advertisement 2 she smiles as she places her hand on the appliance. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue, smiling actors invite viewers into a relation of social affinity.

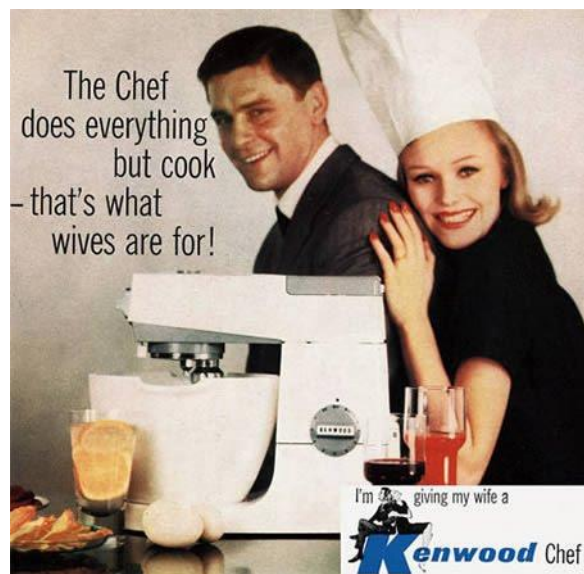
However, as Suwantawit (2020) observes, the gendered positioning of characters in advertisement 1 suggests that the product is marketed not directly to women as consumers but to men as purchasers for their wives. Costuming reinforces this division: the man wears a business suit, symbolising authority and mobility, while the woman dons a chef's hat, anchoring her in domesticity. Goffman's (1979) theory of *gender advertisements* highlights how such symbolic cues reproduce hierarchical roles, even under neutral presentation.

The social interaction for advertisement 1 and 2 is analysed based on the direct gaze made by the social actors of the images. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) called this type of image a 'demand' where "the participant's gaze (and the gesture, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her" (p. 118). The actors in both advertisements 1 and 2 can be seen making direct eye contact with viewers which in a sense is asking viewers to make "contact" with them. Their direct gaze adds demand in which viewers are demanded to pay attention to the advertisement and be included in their "world". Assumingly that the advertisements' targeted customers were women, the direct gaze by the social actors intent to make them relatable to other women.

On the other hand, advertisement 3 and 4 portrayed indirect gaze to the viewers since they are not looking at the viewers. Instead, in advertisement 3, all social actors are interacting with each other while the social actor in advertisement 4 is focusing on his action. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) wrote that "we have, again following Halliday (1985), called this kind of image an 'offer' – it 'offers' the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case" (p. 119). Advertisement 2 includes an image of a family consisting of parents and two children. The husband and the children are all looking at the wife or mother because she is the one who is serving the plate to everyone. Brown and Campbell (1986) reported that "men are seldom shown doing housework" (as cited in Woon, 1994, p. 32). Thus, this image is giving the notion that the mother would be the one who is doing the house chores including cooking and serving meals. Douglas (1994) mentioned that in media, there are certain elements reflected with regard to gender roles where it includes paradoxes of "women serving as both consumers and producers, men as powerful legislators and progressive thinkers who were helpless in the kitchen, and most importantly, America's assuredness and doubt that women would remain subordinate to men in the social hierarchy" (as cited in Fabrizio, 2015, p. 14). Thus, it is evident that this advertisement is trying to portray the notion of women being the one who would be using the kitchen appliances promoted in the poster, rather than showing equality to both genders.

Advertisement 4, released in 2020, presents a shift: the sole actor is a man, shown preparing food with a processor. Although stereotypes are less explicit, the man is framed as serious and authoritative, reconfiguring rather than dismantling traditional hierarchies. This reflects Butler's (1988) concept of *performativity*, wherein gender norms are reiterated through subtle behavioural cues. Marshall, Davis, Hogg, Schneider, and Petersen (2014) similarly found that portrayals of men in advertising often make minimal challenges to traditional masculinity.

Other than analysing the images, the texts written in the advertisements are also analysed in detail. The texts in advertisement 1, 2 and 3 suggest stereotypical remarks of women are supposed to be homemakers. To further explain, in all three advertisements, women are the implied user of the KENWOOD's Chef appliance considering the text in advertisement 1,



"The chef does everything but cook -- that's what wives are for!"

The text above shows that a wife's position is in the kitchen. The KENWOOD's Chef is advertised to help "women" in the kitchen by making their "jobs" easier. Hence, the implied situation in the text is that women are family managers and that they are the appliance's targeted users. Similarly, to support further, a part of the texts in advertisement 2,



"My Kenwood Electric Chef does all the hard work for 101 jobs in a few minutes. I just switch on and take all the credit -- husbands should know their wives deserve this wonderful mixer!"

The text above coincides with women being the targeted user of the appliance and therefore shows that both advertisements make stereotypical remarks on men and women's roles.

However, although the social distance, relation and interaction indicate inclusivity and equality of viewers and the actress, the discourse text in advertisement 2 insinuates power and superiority of the actress to the viewers.

“could you prepare this meal...and have hands like mine?”

Example above shows that the actress in the advertisement is expressing power over the viewers and marking her superiority. The personal style of the language is explicit, the language is standard in terms of lexis and syntax through which means that the advertisement is conducting business; promoting their appliance. The power exchange between viewers and actress deviates. The actress is insinuating power by saying that she is more efficient in the kitchen with her new KENWOOD CHEF compared to viewers who presumably do not have the kitchen appliance. A few other examples that evoke similar notions are

“I made the smoothest, creamiest TOMATO SOUP I also made a savoury SHEPHERD’S PIE Then a feather-light SPONGE PUDDING and I haven’t even soiled my hands!”

Advertisement 3 also shows a similar notion where the texts written in it reflects the remarks on women as the homemakers. The headline of the ads is as follows.



“The Kenwood you bought me prepared this wonderful meal”

This headline is a line uttered by one of the social actors in the image but it is not directly mentioned on who the person is. However, it can evidently be observed that the woman is the one who uttered this line because she is the one who is serving the plates. Not only that, every other social actor in the image is looking at the woman which indicates that they are listening and giving their attention to her while she is uttering the line. Moreover, the woman in the advertisement is looking directly to her husband thus making it clear that the ‘you’ mentioned in the headline is referring to the husband because he is the one who bought the kitchen appliances for her. Wood (1994) explained in her paper that in the media, “female characters devote their primary energies to improving their appearances and taking care of homes and people” (p. 32). So, it is identified that it reflects on how the woman is expected to be the one who is taking care of the home by preparing food.

Another line that is indirectly trying to interpolate the viewers is as follows.

“...what a proud possession for every modern housewife!”

This line is directly telling us that this product is aimed to be owned by a housewife or in specific, women who are said to be the one who will be in the kitchen. To justify, women are stereotypically depicted as younger compared to men, in decorative positions, and are more likely to be unemployed or working in conventional women's occupations (e.g. homemakers and child caretakers), to be shoppers or product consumers, to appear in domestic environments, and to use promote products at home (Courtney & Lockeretz (1971), Ganahl, Prinsen & Netzley (2003), Knoll, Eisend, and Steinhagen (2011), Plakoyiannaki & Zotos (2009), Robinson & Hunter (2008), Sheehan (20014)) as cited by Huhnmann and Limbu (2016). Not only that, the tagline of the advertisement 3 is also showing similar notions on the inequality of gender roles in family. The tagline is as follows.

“Your servant madam ”

In contrast, advertisement 4 which is released in 2020 is no longer reflecting the same notion. Instead, Kenwood focuses more on the relationship between friends rather than family. The headline of this advertisement is as follows.



“Take Your Friends To Tokyo Without Leaving Your Dining Room ”

This headline is no longer indicating the gender roles of women in the kitchen but rather, it is focusing more on the ability of the kitchen appliances. 'Non-stereotypical gender role representation' (NSGR) was examined by Chu, Lee, and Kim (2016) and found that consumers see these advertisements in a positive light.

CONCLUSION

This present study has found that the representation of gender roles in kitchen appliances advertisements are slowly changing. Madichie (2013) stated that cooking is now becoming a more gender-neutral occupation because both men and women are slowly realizing the ‘coolness’ of being associated with the kitchen and it is all because of many celebrity chefs that have been glamorizing the art of cooking.

In advertisement 1, 2, and 3, it can be seen that the gender roles associated with cooking and being in the kitchen - using the kitchen appliances promoted in the ads - were vividly portrayed as the work of ‘women’. Despite having men and even children in the images, the role of using the product itself is always associated with the mother, wife or the woman. It can be seen through the outfit of the women, the actions, and the texts written in the advertisement. Similarly, Dwita (2018) found in her study that “the advertisement of Fair and Lovely Issue of Marriage or continuing master studies construct gender equality through the signs of the linguistic message in the forms of words and sentences in advertisements, photographs or images in advertising” (p. 52).

Resch (1992) wrote a discussion on Althusser’s theory which is The Interpellation of Social Subjects. According to Althusser’s theory, interpellation occurs when “a person connects with a media text: when we enjoy a TV show, for example, this uncritical consumption means that the text had interpellated us into a certain set of assumptions” (Gauntlett, 2010). Althusser (1971) explained that “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing” (p. 174). Through the portrayal of this gender role where women are the one who is always associated with the kitchen work, the viewers are said to be as seduced or ‘hailed’ to this ideology. The ideology has been

instilled in women's life thus making them always feel like they belong to the kitchen. Ottosson and Cheng (2012) mentioned that "the way gender is represented in the media does have an influence on how we perceive gender roles" (p. 39).

However, this has been slowly changing where this ideology is slowly being challenged by many media now including advertisements. It can be seen in advertisement 4 where the social actor of the image is a man, which is the opposite of other advertisements. This step of having only one man in the kitchen appliances advertisement has slowly shown that gender equality in media specifically advertisement is changing. Despite this, Ottosson and Cheng (2012) said that "the gender roles that we are presented with a regular basis are still lagging behind in terms of showing better representations of gender equality" (p. 39).

The findings indicate that while surface-level changes in gender representation are visible, deeper structures of inequality remain. The inclusion of men or "gender-neutral" portrayals often mask a rearticulation of traditional binaries, echoing Goffman's (1979) claim that advertising reshapes but rarely dismantles gender norms. This suggests that advertising commodifies equality as a branding strategy rather than genuinely advancing social transformation. It is recommended for future researchers to study more advertisements instead of 4 and include more brands that promote kitchen appliances. This would help to provide a more detailed analysis and deeper understanding on the representation of gender equality in kitchen appliances advertisements.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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