

Gender display in a lifestyle magazine in Iceland (1978 to 2009)

Bára Jóhannesdóttir Guðrúnardóttir & Ingólfur V. Gíslason
(University of Iceland)

Abstract

One of the marks of gender roles in each society is the way men and women are portrayed in popular culture and advertisements. A number of studies exist that explore this theme, one of which is Goffman's study from 1979, *Gender Advertisements*. The study presented here takes Goffman's analytical framework as its starting point and looks at the presentation of women in pictures in an Icelandic lifestyle magazine over a period of thirty years. The main results are that women have increasingly been portrayed as socially independent and they are more often shown without clothes and objectified. This suggests that as traditional social indicators of femininity and masculinity have become blurred, there is an increased focus on the body as the definition of femininity.

Key words: Gender, advertisements, Goffman, Iceland, lifestyle magazine

Introduction

Iceland is generally regarded as one of the most gender-equal societies in the world and has for four consecutive years (2008-2012) topped the equality list published by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2012). Women's political representation has been fairly high since the late eighties both in municipalities and parliament and is currently at around 40%. Around 78% of women are active on the labour market compared to 83% of the men and women comprise over 66% of those receiving a university degree. Compared to most other societies, Icelandic women are doing fairly well on traditional indicators of gender equality (for an overview see Gíslason, 2007).

In gender studies it has often been pointed out that a similar position of social strength does not necessarily translate into a similar regard for men and women occupying these positions (Connell, 1987; Clover & Kaplan, 2000). For example, women in politics are more often discussed in terms of looks and clothes than their male counterparts (Anderson, 1995; Braden, 1996; McChesney, 1999). The same goes for women in business (Kelan, 2013) and academic women (Fotaki, 2013).

One way to look at the portrayal of men and women in a given society is to study their representation in popular culture and advertisements. Several studies of that kind exist and one of the most famous is Goffman's *Gender advertisements* (1979). According to Goffman men and women are systematically portrayed differently in advertisements and this creates a "genderism" meaning a general idea about the personal and social roles of people based on their gender. These are not necessarily reflections of how men and women really are or how they behave, but more how we think they are and behave, i.e. our cultural ideas about men and women. As such the advertisements are both a reflection of culture, a reinforcement of cultural ideas and ideals and, potentially, an agent of change. Goffman's focus is mainly on the portrayal of women and he demonstrates how women are belittled on several levels and given a status inferior to men. Has this changed and if so in what direction?

A few studies exist that have utilized Goffman's ideas (Belknap & Leonard II, 1991; Bell & Milic, 2002; Kang, 1997) or discuss their applications (Smith, 1996). The present study adds to that body of literature by looking at the development of the portraying of women in an Icelandic lifestyle magazine over a period of 30 years.

Methodology

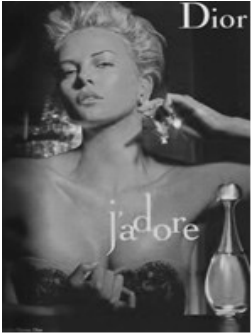
Conceptual definitions




Goffman divided the advertisements that he selected into six main categories; *relative size*; *feminine touch*; *function ranking*; *family*; *ritualization of subordination* and *licensed withdrawal*.




In the study presented here, we take Goffman's scheme as our analytical departure. However we drop one of his categories and add two. The one that we drop is *family*. The main reason is that this appeared very rarely in the magazine under scrutiny, probably because it is a lifestyle magazine and not focusing much on families or the role of women there.

The two categories that we added are from a study by Kang (1997). She used Goffman’s categories as her base (except for *family*) but added *body display* and *independence/self-assertiveness*. We decided to use the former and originally we also intended to use the latter. However, during the initial analysis we deemed Kang’s definition to be too broad and difficult to use. Kang uses *independence/self-assertiveness* to look at the “big picture” namely to see what the overall message of an advertisement is (Kang, 1997, p. 986). We felt that this was a valid point but needed to be operationalized better to be useful. We took our lead from John Berger (1972) and decided to call the category *reversibility* and define it as the possibility to switch the gender used in the advertisement with the opposite gender without it altering the message. Finally we added one category, namely *objectification* which we define instrumentally as the portraying of only a (sexual) part of a woman’s body or showing her as a plaything.

We were therefore left with eight different categories; the analytical scheme was as follows with pictures from the magazine that we used to illustrate the categories:

Category	Picture	Definition
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Body display</i></p>		<p>Un- or semi-clothed bodies. Naked, in underwear or a towel, close-up pictures where shoulders are bare and the model might be, very tight clothes or see-through.</p>

<p><i>Feminine touch</i></p>		<p>When women use their hands or fingers to trace the outlines of objects or touch themselves. They take an object almost without touching it.</p>
<p><i>Function ranking</i></p>		<p>When the man obviously has the leading role or manipulates a woman's body by lifting her or holding her in a possessive manner.</p>
<p><i>Licensed withdrawal</i></p>		<p>Being there physically but not mentally by for example looking out of the picture, talking on a telephone, covering mouth or face with her hand or smiling in an extensive way.</p>

<p><i>Objectification</i></p>		<p>Showing only a (sexual) part of a woman's body (breasts, buttocks), showing her as a plaything.</p>
<p><i>Relative size</i></p>		<p>When the man is shown as being taller in the picture, or given a higher position.</p>
<p><i>Reversibility</i></p>		<p>Whether the genders can be exchanged without the advertisement becoming silly or ridiculous.</p>

Ritualization of subordination



When women are portrayed in a lower position than men; for example sitting or lying on a floor or a bed, tilting their head, bending their body or knees.

Sampling

One of the criticisms voiced against Goffman's study is that he selected pictures "at will... chosen to fit into sets..." (Goffman, 1979, p. 24). Goffman's study was therefore not based on a randomized set of advertisements; he chose the advertisements to illustrate a particular category. We wanted to look at changes over time and therefore decided to use a randomized approach. We chose to use the lifestyle magazine *NýttLif* (New life) since it is the longest running of its kind in Iceland having been published continuously since 1978. We ended our sampling with the 2009 issues. For each year we chose three issues, the first issue of each year, a summer issue and an autumn issue. We decided to focus on three parts of the magazine; pictures on the front pages, in advertisements and in the fashion sections. We randomly chose four advertisements in each issue for analysing with the requirements that they had to be full-page and show adult individuals on them. Sometimes there was only a man or men pictured and then that one was given the code 999 (or missing) and kept in with the samples.

Measurement

Each picture was coded in accordance with the analytical scheme and each category of the encoding was given points, i.e. 1 was for images that conformed to the definitions (for example the man taller, the man guiding the woman) and 0 for images that deviated from the definitions (the man not taller, not guiding the woman, etc.). One of the variables (*reversibility*) had a special coding, the variable being defined as follows: If it was possible to exchange the gender of the model in the picture without

altering the message it got 0 but if it was not possible it got 1. The numbers from each picture were added together and the result gave the degree of gendered display according to our categories. A high outcome indicated a highly-gendered display while a low outcome indicated the opposite.

In the following analysis we focus on the question whether the portrayal of women in advertisements has been changing in the last three decades (from the year 1978 when the magazine *NyttLif* was first published). Time is thus our independent variable and we have divided it into three spans, 1) 1978-1988, 2) 1989-1998 and 3) 1999-2009. Our dependent variables are the different types of portrayal of women. We use Kramer's V to explore the strength of the relationship between the variables (under 0.10 = weak relationship, .11 to .30 = moderate relationship and over 0.30 = strong relationship (Neuman, 2005)). Chi square (χ^2) test is used to analyse if the relation is statistically significant, i.e. if the percentages of each type of portrayal of women in advertisements are significantly different in the three decade categories.

Results

Front pages

The results of the study of the front pages are shown in table 1. As it can be seen there, *function ranking* was almost non-existent during the whole period and *relative size* was very rare. In 1978-1988, *objectification* was fairly rare or in 6.8% of the pictures analysed. In the years 1989-1999, however, the percentage had increased to 22.1%, but in 1999 to 2009 it decreased again to 9.7%. The difference in *objectification* between the three time periods is statistically significant. On the other hand *feminine touch*, *body display*, *reversibility* and *ritualization of subordination* were all fairly frequent and increased significantly over the years except for *feminine touch*. The only category with a significant relative decrease was *licensed withdrawal* from 50% in 1978-1988 to 29.7% in 1999-2009. This might be interpreted as an indication that the increased social activity of women on all levels makes it more of an anomaly to portray them as not being mentally present though their body is there.

Table 1: Front pages in the decades 1978-1988, 1989-1998 and 1999-2009

Variable	1978-1988	1989-1998	1999-2009	χ^2	V
Body display	31.1%	52.3%	62.1%	18.857	0.249**
	23	45	90		
Feminine touch	41.9%	48.8%	45.5%	0.774	0.050
	31	42	66		
Function ranking	1.4%	0%	0.7%	1.120	0.061
	1	0	1		
Licensed withdrawal	50%	34.9%	29.7%	8.868	0.171*
	37	30	43		
Objectification	6.8%	22.1%	9.7%	10.570	0.186**
	5	19	14		
Relative size	2.7%	2.3%	3.4%	0.259	0.029
	2	2	5		
Reversibility	62.2%	79.1%	66.9%	6.009	0.140
	46	68	97		(p=0.05*)
Ritualization of subordination	10.8%	30.2%	26.9%	9.573	0.177**
	8	26	39		
N	74	86	145		
Valid= 305	Missing= 20	Total= 325			
* p < 0.05 ** < 0.01					

And even though it is not shown in the table, it should be mentioned that the number of men on the cover grew throughout the decades.

Advertisements

The results of the study of the advertisements are shown in table 2:

Table 2: Advertisements in the decades 1978-1988, 1989-1998 and 1999-2009

Variable	1978-1988	1989-1998	1999-2009	χ^2	V
Body display	52.9%	77%	78.6%	22.717	0.259**
	64	77	92		
Feminine touch	66.9%	61%	65.8%	0.929	0.052
	81	61	77		
Function ranking	11.6%	7%	5.1%	3.547	0.102
	14	7	6		
Licensed withdrawal	66.9%	65%	55.6%	3.689	0.104
	81	65	65		
Objectification	18.2%	32%	35.9%	10.084	0.173**
	22	32	42		
Relative size	21.5%	8%	6.8%	14.288	0.26**
	26	8	8		
Reversibility	62.8%	71%	77.8%	6.420	0.138*
	76	71	91		
Ritualization of subordination	47.1%	35%	51.3%	6.124	0.104*
	57	35	60		
N	121	100	117		
Valid= 338	Missing= 28		Total= 366		
* p < 0.05 ** < 0.01					

As was the case with the front covers, *relative size* and *function ranking* did not occur often throughout the decades in advertisements. *Relative size* decreased significantly or from 21.5% in 1978-1988 to 6.8% in 1999-2009 and *feminine touch*, *function ranking* and *licensed withdrawal* moved in the same direction though the changes are not statistically significant. This indicates a move towards more socially independent women and their increased agency. On the other hand, *ritualization of subordination*, *body display* and *objectification* all increased significantly as did *reversibility*, all of which

indicate a move towards a sharper focus on sexuality and the body as the defining features of femininity.

Fashion sections

The results of the study of the fashion sections are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Fashion sections in the decades 1978-1988, 1989-1998 and 1999-2009

Variable	1978-1988	1989-1998	1999-2009	χ^2	V
Body display	22.1%	41.6%	55.3%	49.499	0.300**
	48	52	115		
Feminine touch	56.2%	67.2%	61.1%	4.039	0.086
	122	84	127		
Function ranking	13.4%	3.2%	1.9%	25.362	0.215**
	29	4	4		
Licensed withdrawal	58.5%	69.6%	57.7%	5.371	0.099
	127	87	120		
Objectification	5.1%	12%	10.1%	5.904	0.104
	11	15	21		
Relative size	20.3%	6.3%	2.9%	37.134	0.260**
	44	8	6		
Reversibility	42.4%	52%	58.7%	11.335	0.144**
	92	65	122		
Ritualization of subordination	45.6%	0.48%	49.5%	0.655	0.035
	99	60	103		
N	217	125	208		
Valid= 550	Missing= 36		Total= 586		
* p < 0.05 ** < 0.01					

In the same way as with front covers and advertisements the categories *relative size* and *function ranking* were not frequent in images in the fashion sections and both decreased significantly with time. *Relative size*

decreased from 20.3% in 1978-1988 to 2.9% in 1999-2000 and *function ranking* from 13.4% to 1.9%. *Feminine touch*, *licensed withdrawal* and *ritualization of subordination* occurred fairly frequently the whole time and no statistically significant change was detected. That indicates that the behaviour and body language presented through these categories is regarded as a fairly consistent indication of feminine behaviour. *Reversibility* also scored high and increased significantly over time (from 42.4% to 58.7%) meaning that less and less often can we switch genders in the images without it becoming ridiculous or changing the meaning of the image. *Body display* increased dramatically or from 22.1% in 1978-1988 to 55.3% in 1999-2009. *Objectification* moved in the same direction even though it occurred fairly rarely and the increase was not statistically significant.

Discussion

The study presented here reaches similar conclusions as the study by Belknap and Leonard II (1991) and Kang (1997) regarding two of Goffman's categories. *Relative size* and *function ranking* occur fairly rarely. We also see in our study that both decrease over the years. As for the former Goffman claims that it is thoroughly "... assumed that differences in size will correlate with differences in social weight..." (Goffman, 1979, p. 28). He also claims with regard to the latter that in gender interaction the man is likely to perform the executive role and that this "...seems widely represented in advertisements..." (Goffman, 1979, p. 32). It is tempting to see the relative lack of these categories and their decrease over time in the Icelandic magazine as an indication of the changed, and changing, social roles of women. There is certainly much more social weight attached to the roles of women in Iceland today than was the case in the sixties and seventies, so picturing men as taller than women is an anomaly. Similarly, an exclusive emphasis on the executive role of men would probably be seen as ridiculous in a society where men and women are used to seeing and experiencing women in the executive role.

As for *feminine touch* both this study and the one by Kang (1997) report no change in frequency and that this is something that is often portrayed. Belknap and Leonard (1991) also found this fairly frequently. It therefore seems that this is regarded as a fairly un-controversial portrayal of women, that it is quite normal behaviour for them to touch themselves

or delicately fondle objects. Here it would be highly interesting to see if or to what degree a similar behaviour is present in lifestyle magazines for men. Our guess is that such has been and still is pretty rare.

The only category where our results are in the opposite direction to the one in Kang's study is regarding *licensed withdrawal*. Kang found that this had increased from 1979 to 1991 and found it surprising (Kang, 1997, p. 993). We found that it decreased over time particularly on the front page or from 50% in 1978-1988 to 29.7% in 1999-2009. Again, we think that this might be an indication of the fairly strong social position of Icelandic women.

Ritualization of subordination increased over time in our study while it didn't change in Kang's. The increases are statistically significant on the front covers and in advertisements but not in the fashion sections. It is not entirely clear how to interpret this though it is tempting to see it as an indication of the constant sexualisation of women's subordination.

The remaining categories, *body display*, *objectification* and *reversibility* all increased in our study. In general it goes for magazines as well as other aspects of popular culture that the body is much more on display today than before. People, both men and women, show more skin than they used to do. This has both been called sexualisation and pornification. That is a debate we don't want to go into but only point out that this is a general development, not confined to women (for a discussion of the increase in images of naked or semi-naked men in popular culture see Bordo, 1999). This is not to claim that the processes are necessarily the same for men and women or the social meaning similar but only an observation of a general trend (see Gill, 2009 for an in-depth discussion).

Though it is perhaps not quite as clear, we think that the increase in images where we cannot change the genders without altering the message (*reversibility*) points in the same direction. Without recourse to gendered social roles the attention has to be on the body if one wants to emphasize the difference. There would be nothing ridiculous about changing the gender of an executive so the body must be what is focused on.

It seems to us that there has been a diminishing of images that show, or can be interpreted as showing women in an inferior social position. In that regard men and women are increasingly portrayed in a similar way in magazines such as *NýttLíf*. Simultaneously there has been an increased focus on the body (*body display*, *objectification*). That is to say, we propose that as the social worlds of men and women become increasingly

alike the body becomes more prominent as the defining area of femininity (and masculinity). The body becomes the bedrock, the one remaining marker of the difference between men and women which explains the changes observed in *Nýtt Líf* 1978-2009.

References

- Anderson, R. (1995). *Consumer Culture and TV Programming*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Belknap, P., & Leonard II, W. M. (1991). A conceptual replication and extension of Erving Goffman's study of gender advertisements. *Sex Roles*, 25(3-4), 103-118.
- Bell, P. & Milic, M. (2002). Goffman's Gender Advertisements revisited: Combining content analysis with semiotic analysis. *Visual Communication*, 1(2), 203-222.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.
- Braden M. (1996). *Women Politicians and the Media*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Connell, R. (1987). *Gender & Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fotaki, M. (2013). No Woman is Like a Man (in Academia): The Masculine Symbolic Order and the Unwanted Female Body. *Organization Studies*.
- Gill, R. (2009). Beyond the Sexualization of Culture' Thesis: An Intersectional Analysis of Sixpacks', Midriff's' and Hot Lesbians' in Advertising. *Sexualities*, 12(2), 137-160.
- Gíslason, I. V. (2009). Gender changes in Iceland. From rigid roles to negotiations. *Arctic & Antarctic*, 3 (3), p. 121-149.
- Glover, D. & Kaplan, C. (2000). *Genders*. New York: Routledge.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. London: The MacMillan Press LTD.
- Kang, M. E. (1997). The portrayal of women's images in magazine advertisements:
Goffman's gender analysis revisited. *Sex Roles*, 37, 979-996.
- Kelan, E. K. (2013). The becoming of business bodies: Gender, appearance, and leadership development. *Management Learning*, 44(1), 45-61.

- McChesney R. (1999). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Neuman, W. L. (2005). *Social research methods: quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Boston, Mass; London: Allyn and Bacon.
- Smith, G. (1996). Gender advertisements revisited: A visual sociology classic. *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, 2(1).
- World Economic Forum. (2012). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2012*. Downloaded March 14. from <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2012>.

Received: February 12, 2013

Accepted: April 12, 2013