From sex objects to bumbling idiots: tracing advertising students' perceptions of gender and advertising

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ABSTRACT

While much attention has been given to critiquing sexism and stereotyping in advertising texts, less weight is afforded to examining the gendered opinions and worldviews of the practitioners who create such texts and even less focus on such attitudes as held by advertising students—the next generation of advertisers. This paper is concerned with exploring advertising students' attitudes towards representations of the sexes in adverts, and how this may reflect their gendered opinions more generally. Analysing individual, semi-structured student interviews ($n = 12$) reveals that, while there was widespread acknowledgement that sexual objectification of women in advertising remains prevalent, there was a discursive turn towards a concern for men and boys, and assertions that misandry has emerged as a concerning and unwelcome trend in advertising imagery and texts. This was bolstered by a less prevalent theme; one which lauds the figure of the "tomboy" and thereby serves to privilege the male experience.

Introduction

At a time when much discussion is happening at a macro level with regard to sexism and harassment in such media industries as film, theatre and comedy, as seen with the #metoo and #TimesUp movements, it is also important to engage with micro environments, such as reflected in the focus here on undergraduate and postgraduate advertising programmes. Case studies carried out at these more close-up and intimate quarters can be revealing about individual's gendered attitudes and worldviews, and in respect of this study it tells us something about what we might expect from the advertisers of tomorrow. More generally, both macro and micro discussions of sexism are currently taking place amidst the backdrop of a turbulent political and social climate that has emerged globally. This climate, which is marked by a re-energised War of the Sexes, particularly in operation in the USA as exemplified by US President Donald Trump's overt misogynistic behaviour, informs the contemporary gender and sexual zeitgeist. It is timely also to examine the issues explored here because of the renewed level of attention given to advertising; both in terms of production and content. Indeed, the Women's European Coalition against Media Sexism (WECAMS), a collaboration of three women's organisations across the UK, France and Italy specifically states its aim as

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combating media sexism in advertising. It works to draw attention to, and lobbies for change of advertising practice in the area of sex stereotyping, particularly against women and girls. It has engaged with the European Advertising Standards Alliance in a bid to begin a conversation about the possibility for standardising sets of guidelines aimed at tackling and preventing sexism and gender stereotyping in advertising. Building on second-wave feminist work, which expanded the struggle for equality from an exclusive focus on material concerns to also include the realm of the symbolic (Judith Williamson 1978; Erving Goffman 1979; Jean Kilbourne 1979), contemporary feminist campaigns have once more returned to debates on representational ideology.

While an extensive body of academic work deconstructs gender imagery within advertising texts, in part revealing the prevalence of a postfeminist sensibility in contemporary adverts, particularly regarding self-objectification, claims of empowerment and independence through consumption, and the return to genetic determinism (see Rosalind Gill 2007, 2009a, 2009b), there is considerably less scholarship on the processes which produce these texts. In other words, issues of how advertising texts are produced and who is creating them are ones that have received comparatively little attention (with notable exceptions Sean Nixon 2003; Anne M. Cronin 2004; Michele Gregory 2009). The people who generate media products, cultural commodities, and advertising texts warrant attention because, in addition to organisations and agencies, the individual producer is central to creating the kinds of texts and images that shape and represent symbolic and contemporary understandings of gender, gender roles, and expected and culturally approved behaviours for the sexes. Additionally, focusing on advertising students is especially pertinent given that they represent future advertising practitioners and producers. Indeed, the educational sphere marks the space where there is perhaps most scope to ensure advertising's next generation become critical of stereotypical and sexist gender norms, both societally and within advertising texts. Consequently, this study explores advertising students' attitudes towards representations of the sexes in adverts, as well as their gendered opinions more generally.

Literature review

Advertising plays a central role in informing and shaping gendered ideas and beliefs. According to David Hesmondhalgh, although advertising differs to other cultural industries such as film, it is nonetheless "centred on the creation of texts and require(s) the work of symbol creators" (David Hesmondhalgh 2007, 13). Through advertising texts, society's dominant notions about gender are constantly rehearsed and reconstructed. Advertising and its outputs are especially worthy of attention given its undeniable omnipresence, not just across multiple media platforms but also in our physical environment in the form of billboard and poster campaigns. Therefore, how advertisers choose to frame gender, gender roles and relations between the sexes becomes part of the psychosocial landscape which impacts people's attitudes and behaviours towards women and men. Like other media forums, advertising is far from immune to the gender ideologies that pervade our societies. Indeed, the notion of whether the media breeds and feeds certain beliefs about the sexes or simply reflects them is not an easy case to answer. Nevertheless, it is clear that ideological attitudes to gender and gender roles that are characterised by patterns of domination and subordination, which

dichotomously position men in a privileged position over women, are excessively concentrated in advertising texts (Williamson 1978; Goffman 1979; Jean Kilbourne 1999; Gill 2007; Michelle M Lazar 2006).

Forming an important cornerstone to writings on gender and advertising has been the critical research undertaken in the 1970s on unpacking the gendered codes embedded in advertising texts. Employing semiology, psychoanalysis and content analysis, theorists such as Williamson (1978) and Goffman (1979) have exposed the differential statuses that apply to media's representations of women and men and have shown how advertising imagery upholds gendered social norms that work to reinforce and reaffirm reductive and restrictive gender roles, behaviours and expectations. More recently, the entanglement of third-wave feminism, postfeminism and Lad Culture in the 1990s coalesced around neoliberal notions of self-improvement and self-surveillance (Claire Moran and Christina Lee 2013), an individualised conceptualisation of empowerment, a return to assumptions of "natural," biological and genetically determined differences between the sexes (in other words, a supposedly tongue-in-cheek "war of the sexes"), as well as the Lad Culture-driven embrace of sexual objectification and conspicuous consumption as empowering (Debbie Ging 2009). These discourses made their way into cultural texts and—in particular—advertisements, typified by the emboldened female figure of contemporary postfeminist advertisements, such as that evidenced in the 1994 Eva Herzigova Wonderbra advert titled "Hello Boys." While such representations may seem favourable when compared with the more passive female sex-object of the '60s through the '80s, this may not be so. Helen Malson, Emma Halliwell, Irmgard Tischner, and Annadis Rudolfsdottir call into question the merits of advertisers' reframing of female sexuality in active terms by focusing on women's pleasure and sexual appetites. They note that "depictions of women as active sexual subjects may be even more damaging than more traditional objectifying representations in that they seem to similarly exacerbate women's body dissatisfaction whilst also leading more strongly to self-objectification" (Helen Malson, et al. 2011, 97). In this way, postfeminist advertising works to obscure gender inequalities, with Lazar also noting that "(u)nlike advertising in earlier periods, which depicted women in obviously demeaning and sexist ways and made feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism a relatively straightforward affair, critique of postfeminist advertising is less clear-cut" (Michelle M Lazar 2007, 160). This is because the postfeminist narrative of empowerment through self-objectification mitigates the charge that advertisers be held to account for sexualised and objectified imagery.

Given the more recent resurgence of a fourth-wave of feminism (Nicola Rivers 2017), the relevance of postfeminism as a concept has been called into question. However, the term is here retained on the basis that it can be defined, understood and employed as an "analytical term" (Rosalind Gill 2016) rather than positioning postfeminism as a particular point in time. It is clear that, of all the features comprising postfeminism, it is the contradictory nature of it as a concept, and as an entanglement of evolving gender values, that endures. Indeed, Rosalind Gill's (2017) argument for paying close attention to the contentious issue of gender in the newest gender culture wars of the post-Trump era is underpinned by her contention that continuing to analyse the operation of postfeminism as a sensibility—tied in particular to neoliberalism—will go some way in explaining the current gender climate. Gill maintains that, rather than

having a diminished relevance, that in fact understanding postfeminism now is more urgent given its even "tighter" and more "hegemonic" stranglehold on everyday life. The same characteristics that defined postfeminism in its earliest analytical iterations still apply, some to an even greater extent. For instance, the trend towards self-surveillance has intensified with social media usage, Instagram practices, and filter apps on phones. In addition, discourses of female empowerment and choice through consumption and self-objectification, and its associated ethos of individualism and meritocracy are deeply embedded and accepted. Therefore, despite the emergence of a new strand of feminism, which is characterised by its outward-looking social and political consciousness and which positions intersectional concerns front and centre (Kira Cochrane 2013), post feminism continues to define popular cultural rhetoric, discourse and imagery, finding expression in contemporary advertising texts (Gill 2016, 2009a, 2009b, Rosalind Gill 2008). In effect, the trends and resulting narratives of the 1970s women's movement, the "new man" of the 80s, and the Lad Culture and postfeminism of the 90s, all feed into contemporary advertisements in complex and contradictory ways.

Equally complex is the production process of embedding and encoding gender within advertising texts, which must account for how media creators utilise personal resources to inform their working practices. Cronin notes from participants in her study that "it became clear that in the process of producing advertising campaigns, practitioners draw on their own experience as viewers of advertisements and as consumers of products" (2004, 353). Similarly, according to Nixon, it is absolutely vital to examine and explore the subjective identities of advertising practitioners, because these aspects inform, drive and influence creative decisions and advertising content. Nixon calls these *informal cultures*, which "set limits upon and provide resources for the performance of the creative executive" (2003, 35). In other words, the use of advertising industry techniques, such as market surveys, focus groups, and consumer research, may often come secondary to practitioners use of intuitive "knowledge" and assumptions about consumers. This bears huge significance when considering practitioners "beliefs" and attitudes about male and female consumers and speaks to the need to reveal their gendered opinions and worldviews.

Highlighting how gendered working practices and organisational cultures in advertising agencies facilitate a hypermasculine environment that is unwelcoming and oftentimes hostile to women, scholars such as Gregory (2009), Nixon (2003), Kasey Windels and Karen L Mallia 2015, Sean Nixon and Ben Crewe 2004, and Mats Alvesson 1998 offer interesting and revealing perspectives on the gendered identities of practitioners working, producing and creating advertisements in the industry. For example, evidence of displays of "macho" behaviour by male employees, such as damage to venue properties, heavy drinking, and drug-taking at social gatherings, and industry awards shows was found (Nixon and Crewe 2004). Likewise, Gregory (2009) identifies how the dominance of an aggressive masculinity creates a "locker room" atmosphere that pervades the advertising industry and serves to ostracise both women working in these spaces, and indeed men who do not conform. Such hypermasculinity has been found to be excessively concentrated among the creative teams in ad agencies (Nixon 2003; Cronin 2004; Gregory 2009; Karen E. Mallia 2008; Windels and Mallia 2015). This is especially worthy of attention given that the creative is the most influential in shaping advertising campaigns (Matthew Soar 2000), including making decisions of a gendered ideological nature.

In seeking to account for how gender impacts on professional progression in advertising creative departments, Windels and Mallia cite work that demonstrates that entrenched and sustained working practices have historically and traditionally been those that valorise typically masculine traits at the expense of feminine ones. These practices are perpetuated through "informal networks" and an organisational culture that privileges hypermasculine styles of behaviour and communication. Adherence to these forms of behaviour is facilitated through "organisational learning," or a kind of socialisation into a masculinist agency culture; something that is referred to as "situated learning," which is influenced by "collective social actions in a community of practice" (2015, 3). Female advertisers working in creative departments face greater difficulties in "learning" to succeed than their male counterparts because of the masculinist environments in which they are working. In order to succeed, new entrants undergo a process of context-specific instruction, which involves being "able to 'read' the situation and act in ways that are valued by other members of the community... Members must learn how to talk and act in the manner of full participants" (2015, 7).

The distinction between four levels of integration into the "community of practice" that comprises the creative advertising department has implications for considering the continuity between advertising training or education, and advertising work. Specifically, the first position with respect to membership of the "community" of advertisers, which is referred to as "pre-peripheral experiences" (2015, 13) has relevance with regard to students' transition into professional practice. At this level, the advertising student does not have access to the community, and indeed knows little about the gendered nature of work practices and how dominant masculine values and norms impact on organisational expectations that pertain to male and female colleagues alike. The pre-peripheral stage, for students, is characterised by their drawing on often misguided perceptions of advertising work. Indeed, as Windels and Mallia note, their research participants were "positive about their pre-peripheral experiences in school... (which) 'didn't feel like a boys' club'" (2015, 14). Regardless of their educational years not accurately reflecting the realities of working in the industry, advertising students do begin to construct a professional identity, and to "identify as community members" (2015, 14) during their training. It is not until students transition out of the educational space into the professional setting, either during the phase of an internship or when taking up their first job in the industry, that they progress onto the next stages of membership. It is at this point that the early career advertising practitioner begins their socialisation into agency and organisational gendered cultures.

It is clear that gendered images emanating from the industry are created and produced in working cultures that have been found to be antagonistic to women and feminist values. Likewise, practitioners working in the field rely on already existing gendered tropes in popular culture generally, and advertisements in particular, to offer a steer for how to encode gender in their advertising campaigns. As a result, gendered practices in the field become entrenched and incoming practitioners go through a period of adaptation or a "process of socialisation" (Liesbet Van Zoonen 1994; Windels and Mallia 2015), during which they take up the working practices embedded in advertising agencies. It is in the realm of education that there is perhaps most scope to challenge gender stereotyping. However, as has been indicated there is relatively little known about this potential. This study, therefore, provides a starting

point to exploring that potential by revealing and highlighting the gendered attitudes that students are likely to carry through with them into their professional lives; even before they are influenced by professional socialisation. When advertisers or advertising students choose to use gender as a unique or an emotional selling point for products and services, it is helpful to be given an insight into their own, often unexamined views on these issues, so that one might be in a better position to unpack the gendered content of adverts.

Method

This study is concerned with psychosocial factors in relation to gender, and therefore explores attitudes pertaining to gender and representations of gender among advertising students. Analysing how advertising students understand and engage with issues of gender, both in a general sense and in how they react to content in adverts that is sexist and stereotypical, is predicated on Nixon's (2003) contention that the "informal cultures" and subjective gendered identities and experiences of advertising practitioners are crucial in how they approach advertising production and practice.

The student sample for this study was obtained from two third-level institutions in Dublin; one of which provides an undergraduate degree course in advertising and the other offering a postgraduate degree in advertising. For the purposes of this article, the research data drawn on include individual, semi-structured interviews with students ranging from first-year undergraduate to masters level (*n* = 12). Several advertising practitioners were also interviewed as part of the wider study that this paper is drawn from; one such relevant comment from a female artistic director is included. All 12 student interviewees were self-selected, which comprised five female students (of which, one was a postgraduate student) and seven male students (which included two postgraduate students). The interview topic guide covered subject areas such as their attitudes to issues of gender, stereotyping, and sexualisation. Interviewees were also asked their opinions of advertising portrayals and depictions of the sexes, gender roles, representations of masculinity and femininity; often drawing on specific advertising campaigns and products. For instance, students were asked to reflect on the question, *in thinking about designing an advertising campaign, do you give much consideration to how various social groups—such as women and men—are represented?* They were also asked *is gender stereotyping of concern or relevance to you? What if it's done in humorous way?; Do you think objectification of women's bodies in advertising is still an issue?*; and *do you think men's bodies are objectified and eroticized in contemporary adverts in the same way as women's?* Such questions, among others, were conceived in order to push students to articulate their viewpoints about these issues, and thereby shed light on how they perceive advertising and its related issues of gender stereotyping and sexual objectification.

A qualitative approach, which aims at "understanding something (or) gaining insight into what is going on and why" (Joseph A. Maxwell 2013, 28; cited in Pat Bazeley 2013, 7) was adopted for this study, with data analysed through the application of a thematic analytic framework. According to Earl Babbie, "(a)lthough qualitative research is sometimes undertaken for purely descriptive purposes," mostly it involves the "search for explanatory patterns" (Earl Babbie 2008, 416). Bazeley (2013) likewise stresses the need

to go beyond simply describing themes, and instead to conceptually explore and outline the significance of patterns and themes. With this benchmark in mind, thematic analysis was therefore deemed suitable to interpret the data, and to enable an exploration of the patterns and themes of this study. Nevertheless, the limitations associated with this research are in making general conclusions, because "any one person's experience will be limited, partial and socially located, and so cannot be taken as general knowledge of how social phenomena are organized as social relations" (Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland 2002, 152). Indeed, it cannot be assumed that advertising student's perspectives on gender will always automatically influence the content of advertisements they are creating, or will go on to create; nor how they are read or interpreted by the public.

Notwithstanding the limitations in making that link, highlighting potential inherent biases among the next cohort of advertising practitioners helps strengthen the case for promoting greater gender awareness among academics, course directors and professionals in this sphere. It offers an opportunity to document attitudes, to ensure that, from an ethical, social justice and egalitarian viewpoint the advertising sector reflects on how to reduce its rehashing of gender stereotypes, thereby hopefully affecting gender relations in society more generally. The European Commission's Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in 2010 contended that "in order to ensure a long term impact, gender equality should be a compulsory module for training in university studies of journalism and communication" (European Commission 2010, 13). This study extends that sentiment to advertising and marketing courses.

Findings

The interview data showed that while there was widespread acknowledgement among students that sexual objectification of women in advertising remains prevalent, there was a less expected discursive turn towards a concern for men and boys, and assertions that misandry has emerged as a concerning and unwelcome trend in advertising imagery and texts. This was bolstered by a less widespread theme; one which lauds the "tomboy" and thereby serves to privilege men and the male experience. These three themes suggest that, on the whole, while students may be intellectually capable of recognising that advertising persists in representing women in reductive and stereotypical ways, they simultaneously demonstrate a notable emotional investment in pointing out that advertising's treatment of men deserves attention. This reflects a broader androcentric gender discourse tied to a devaluation of women and girls, and especially a dismissal of femininity.

Women as sex objects and homemakers in advertising: students offer a critical perspective of sexualisation but little concern for the domesticated female in ads

Two tropes commonly found in advertising imagery pertaining to women were discussed with students: sexualisation and domesticity. Mostly the students demonstrate adeptness at deconstructing and unpacking gendered ideology in advertisements. Fashion advertising was held to task by Della for setting trends that objectify and sexualise women: "In ads themselves I have noticed that there is a big difference, like

the guys… are always this really cool kind of person, whereas girls kind of look like a sex object basically." Bernard, similarly, was proficient at deconstructing fashion advertising by picking up on how women are represented as physically vulnerable and submissive. He interprets the woman in a Gucci ad as looking "scared, alarmed," and that the male is "the dominant partner." Indeed, Laura Mulvey's 1975 concept of the "Male Gaze" was something several students raised during discussions of how men and women are differentially depicted in advertising. They grasp well the notion of the gaze as disempowering for women.

Nevertheless, the skill of deconstructing and reading sexual themes in advertising was not present in all students. When Kevin, for example, was asked if he thought that there was a trend of objectifying women in adverts, he replied:

Kevin: Not at the moment no. I think there's only two ads that spring to mind … the Hunky Dorys and the Club Orange ads. The rest of the ads, even tailored towards men, they're not really as gender orientated or anything like that.

Yet, despite Kevin's blindness to the sexual objectification of women in advertising, he talks about the appeal of certain types of adverts targeting men, and notes that, "once a guy sees an ad with a macho guy and a girl on his arm and all the money in the world … it does appeal to him, it definitely does." By so saying, he tacitly endorses the objectification of women, who—in this exchange—is represented as an object on the arm of the "macho guy," a possession or prize he has acquired. Paul also struggles with identifying instances of sexual objectification, suggesting that this is maybe because he does not get offended very easily. He reduces concerns of this nature to an issue of political correctness saying that those who complain about sexual objectification "just need to maybe lighten up a bit."

The objectification of women's bodies in advertising texts is fed by a contemporary postfeminist, sexualised climate. Postfeminist narratives of sexualisation and objectification as "empowering" not surprisingly has bred a "socio-cultural climate where some young women perceive that a positive self-identity can be built on reclaiming the sexualized portrayals that modern feminism has sought to challenge" (Maddy Coy and Maria Garner 2010, 658). However, articulations of self-sexual-objectification as empowering were not present among the young women interviewed. Colette, for instance, in spite of expressing her frustration with women receiving social sanction depending on what they wear, was also critical of young women who wear revealing clothing:

Colette: When I'm on a night out, and I see like, I don't know, a girl with a tiny dress on … [I] turn round to my friends and say, "If I ever come out in a dress that short, just kill me."

This rejection of self-objectification as empowering might be reflective of longstanding, albeit eroding, conservative sexual values in Ireland that prized and valued women and girls for modesty and virtue, but it may also suggest that female students are sceptical of the supposed agency and power to be garnered by self-presenting in sexually objectified ways. Nevertheless, while not actively embracing a postfeminist sexualised discourse, both male and female students do tacitly endorse it, to some degree, given the extent to which they seem capable of shrugging off objectified portrayals of women in ads. Gillian, for instance, recommends that those who express

offence at sexist advertising should "get over it." Perhaps the ubiquity of sexualised portrayals of women has resulted in a complacency and indifference to the sustained issue of sexual objectification of women in advertising.

While students, for the most part, show competence and some interest in discussing problematic sexual tropes in advertising, even on a superficial or intellectual—as opposed to an emotional "felt"—level, this was in sharp contrast to their investment in talking about the ubiquitous woman in adverts for domestic products. Expressing a view that it is inevitable that domestic products are aimed at women, although regretful that this is the case, Nick said that adverts for household products remain primarily targeted to "housewives" because market research most likely reveals that women still do the majority of housework. This is echoed by Cat, who said that advertising precedence means that adverts have always associated domestic products with women and so it is less risky to stick to that.

For Fiona, the shift from the stay-at-home housewife to the "busy working mom" character in ads is praised as progress:

Fiona:　Back then it was the woman in the house during the day you know at 1 o'clock, the time when women would be at work now and she's cleaning the house … but now it's the woman rushing out to work or how to get things done fast so you can get to work or pick up the kids. The mam is actually busy during the day now, not that it's the woman's role to stay at home, like there has been a big change.

More generally, Fiona was found to hold contradictory views about what constitutes equality. Although she abstractly subscribes to feminist views, she does distance herself from "extreme" feminists. Indicating that she would not expect or demand equal domestic burden sharing with a male partner, since women are "naturally" better at those tasks, the implications for equality of returning to essentialist thinking of women's natural and inevitable place in the home are tellingly revealed in this exchange where, in elaborating on advertising's portrayal of women and domestic chores, she said:

Fiona:　I think it's nothing to do with advertising. Like I wouldn't trust my Dad to go do the full week's shopping … It's just one of those gender role things; the woman does the shopping, and the man fixes the doors… Naturally enough, if I had kids I would want to stay at home with them… I wouldn't trust a man to go into a shop and pick up the right things.

Sentiments such as this, coming from a young woman born in the mid 1990s at the height of postfeminism, point to the prematurity of the optimism that followed second-wave feminism. Although the 1980s briefly marked a period of social discourse caught up with the "new man" of the era, who was supposed to encapsulate an aptitude for domesticity and a much increased involvement in fatherhood and caring, the 1960s and '70s did not sow the seeds of irreversible change. The more accurate reality of a mostly unchanged domestic sphere is echoed by invoking Arlie Hochschild 1989 phrase "the stalled revolution" to refer to women's persistent double-shift. The absence of resentment in evidence among the study's female interviewees is therefore notable.

Pat O'Connor's work on the changing status of Irish women remains helpful in contexualising the reticence of students to reject associations of women with the

home. O'Connor notes that "(i)n Ireland, the social subordination of women was seen, until very recently, as 'natural', 'inevitable', 'what women want'. It was reflected in women's allocation to the family arena, where their position was given rhetorical validation" (Pat O'Connor 1998, 245); something that was enshrined in the 1937 Irish Constitution. Although this does not prevent women from working outside the home, it symbolically serves to connect women primarily to her life as mother and care-giver. While there have been significant feminist advances in Irish society since O'Connor wrote those words, not least in terms of the repeal of the eight amendment to the Constitution in order to allow for legislating for abortion, Irish public discourse continues to disproportionately maintain the domestic sphere as a woman's space. This perhaps simultaneously explains female students rejection (for themselves, at least) of sexualised imagery, without the same "concern" for equating women with the domestic sphere. In other words, sexualisation is understood to be "bad" in an Irish context, while domesticity is considered natural and good.

The reverse stereotype and the double standard: expressions of concern about advertising's treatment of men

Indeed, when homing in on critiques of gendered advertising trends shrugged shoulders at the implications for women and for relations between the sexes of continuing to see women as either sex objects or homemakers often morphed into a concern for how men are being portrayed in adverts. Students were found to take up positions that indicate a general apathy and resignation with respect to images of women as either mothers or sex objects: "I think it's definitely something that's been around a while. I don't really see it going anywhere. I don't see it disappearing from culture any time soon" (Colette). However, this apathy and complacency is not evident when, unprompted, discussion turned to the issue of misandry in advertising texts. Arguably students were animated by this issue because the relative scarcity of advertising imagery that could be deemed misandrist has meant that students are not jaded by discussion of such. Within this theme, mostly male interviewees reference a concern with respect to a swing toward misandrist representations in advertising, while female students talk about how unfair beauty standards perhaps now apply to men more than women. For instance, Colette expressed concern with an unfair double standard that culminates in men more pressured to look a certain, unrealistic way: "Real women aren't expected to look like that on a daily basis, but you would still kind of expect lads these days to have a six pack and have the perfect hair and all."

Although students recognise that advertising imagery remains more of an issue with respect to women, the interview data indicate that the male students, not surprisingly, want attention to be paid to them. However, they are then quick to refute being impacted by sexualised, objectified, or condescending imagery. In an exchange with Paul, he brings up the Hunky Dorys advertising campaign, and—in a nod to the idiom "sex sells"—says that if men were depicted in similar sexualised ways, there would not be the same uproar. He alludes to feminists being too sensitised to representations of women at the expense of men and thinks that offence is taken far too readily. For example, he discusses the backlash against a male NASA employee who was interviewed wearing a shirt with scantily clad female cartoon Manga characters on it, which he

thought was a "hilarious" shirt. Although the shirt in question was indeed playful, and the man mortified and apologetic following the fall-out, Paul fails to see wider trends associated with the objectification of women and makes the false comparison with men: "I mean if a girl was wearing a t-shirt of just a guy with a six pack on it no one would… whatever, who cares like." Paul offers contradictory views on misandry and male objectification in advertising. Although he bemoans what he perceives as an unfair, hypocritical, and disproportionate concern for female sexualisation and objectification in advertising imagery at the expense of paying attention to similar issues for men, he is quick to eschew that this even is an issue for men. This sense that young men want to be afforded attention was echoed by Fiona in explaining her male classmates' reactions to the Diet Coke adverts:

Fiona: The men were giving out and … saying like the average man doesn't have a six pack, he doesn't have huge muscles, he doesn't have tanned dark skin and lovely hair, like they were giving out that if women can give out about them things then so can men.

Aside from issues of male objectification, both Bernard and Pauline identify what they perceive as an emerging and concerning trend; that being the incompetent male in adverts. Pauline, an artistic director at a Dublin-based advertising agency explained, "There's a pet hate of our creative director… he hates the way men are always or quite often perceived to be the bumbling idiot in ads next to the woman … who is the smart, logical one," while Bernard said: "There seems to be a reverse stereotype of (men)… pictured as bumbling idiots." It is significant that Bernard and Pauline both use the same terminology in referring to the "bumbling idiot" trope and speaks to the perception of this as an embedded trend. Indeed, this notion was referenced in the UK's Advertising Standards Authority publication, "Depictions, Perceptions and Harm: A report on gender stereotypes in advertising." They suggest that one of ways to reduce gender stereotyping in adverts is to avoid featuring "a man trying and failing to undertake simple parental or household tasks" (2017, 4). While the ASA's commitment to eliminating reductive depictions of the sexes in adverts is to be lauded, the implied assumption is that such ads are more common than they are. Furthermore, the existence of ads where men are, in fact, shown to be inept at domestic labour seems to have been interpreted by Bernard and Pauline as indicating a more general insulting of males in advertising. The idea that men are often shown in ways that are designed to demean them, however, is to grossly over-estimate a supposed swing towards a certain type of depiction of men in advertising. For instance, Debbie Ging and Roddy Flynn's study (2008) shows that areas of expertise and authority firmly remain the preserve of men in advertisements. Therefore, this surprising position that men and masculinity are denigrated in advertising is an important one to examine.

Beginning in the 1990s, academic research concerned with hegemonic masculinity has theorised how normative constructions of a privileged version of masculinity marginalise many men, as well as women. R. W. Connell (2005) makes the case for paying attention to men, since men are the "gatekeepers" in that they control most of the resources. Yet, the increased social and academic discussion of men is not without implications. Across a wide range of issues "(i)n the last fifteen years, in the 'developed' countries of the global metropole, there has been a great deal of popular concern with

issues about men and boys" (2005, 1802–1803). The formerly exclusive focus on women within feminist debates facilitated a backlash that became manifest, Connell posits, in a form of antifeminist politics. Such a backlash has gathered pace since Connell writing over a decade ago in such movements as MRA groups (Men's Rights Activists), and male-separatists proponents calling for MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) (Angela Nagle 2017). The philosophy of such groups is predicated on assumptions that feminist campaigns have disempowered men. Although Connell points out that the experience of men is not always favourable to women's, he debunks the notion that men are now the disadvantaged sex and asserts that they still hold greater advantage over women. Nevertheless, concern for men and boys is a political and social discourse that continues to thrive and gain momentum.

The turn towards a concern for men and boys among this study's participants chimes with Connell's observations of a masculinist discourse that positions the male sex as disadvantaged and disempowered. However, this narrative is mostly benign among the advertising student cohort, since when the spotlight turns to shine full-glare on their attitudes around this, these concerns wilt away. Nevertheless, the presence of this theme suggests that both the young men and women interviewed were picking up on a MRA-esque sensibility in wider social debates around the state of men, and relations between the sexes.

The tomboy: "men are always willing to give it a go, you know. and with a tomboy. . . they're always willing to give it a go"

This apparent turn towards a concern for men and boys is bolstered by a more muted discourse that elevates the notion of "tomboy." While this was only explicitly raised by two male students, it is echoed in how the young women distance themselves from other women and specifically from "girly" girls. This was especially in evidence in the female students responses to the Carlsberg "Crate Escape" advert. This advert was discussed because it exemplifies a postfeminist polarisation of the sexes discourse, as well as a narrative of men as adventurous, fun-loving, and low-maintenance pitted against notions of women as gullible, vain, and demanding. All the young women interviewed, with the exception of Colette, really like the advert and express sympathy with the male characters in the ad. For instance, Fiona found the advert "brilliant," and says "you start to root for the men"; while Gillian thought it was "hilarious" in the way that it "shows women being all, I guess, girly, wanting to do girly things like going to a spa and the men are like 'no we want to go drink beer and watch the game'." These reactions indicate an androcentric viewpoint, resulting in a "sympathy" for the male characters in the ad and a "rooting" for them against the "strict," and "bitchy" spa-attendant and the unwitting, "oblivious" and "gullible" girlfriend. Facilitated by the unflattering depictions of women in the ad, it is not surprising that most of the young women interviewed took up a position of alignment with the male characters.

The tomboy narrative also stems from a gendered discourse of men as easy and low-maintenance. Bernard explained: "I mean I buy the nearest shampoo I can get, you know, whereas other members of my family … go to considerable time or considerable expense to get a specific shampoo." This notion of men as unconstrained and free is echoed in how Gareth discursively constructs men and boys as fun and funny, with

humour far less a feature of women and women's experiences. He talks about the skill that men and boys have for creative "jeering" and insults, and marks out the "inventive" witty put-down as a male phenomenon. He notes that, in cases where women are being humorous, "it seems to be more a subtle thing and … naturally that doesn't lend itself to comedy because comedy tends to be more overt and obvious." By implication, therefore, women and girls are not funny or comedic and he goes on to suggest that female advertisers cannot create funny adverts.

Gender differences between boys and girls, Nick believes, are partly due to how kids are socialised. He astutely suggests that this culminates more often in a social sanctioning of boys associating with feminine things. He says, of his experience growing up, "I was allowed to try an awful lot of things I shouldn't have been able to try"; meaning hobbies more commonly taken up by girls. He kept his involvement in these activities quiet from his school friends because of a heightened awareness as a child of appropriate masculine interests. Such reluctance reinforces a sense that "girly" things were not cool. While he suggests that girls might be teased for being into "manly" stuff like judo or karate, and might be called "tomboy," he maintains that this does not really have negative connotations. In a revealing comment, he notes that, in calling a girl a "tomboy":

Nick: …it depends on how it's said as opposed to the actual term and where it's coming from, like if it's coming from a group of girls calling you a tomboy …. that could be bad but if it comes from, like my close friend referring to his little sister as a tomboy, that's just "she has interests similar to ours, good on her."

There is an assumption here that other girls would be derogatory and mean about a girl considered a "tomboy," but if the term comes from boys it is a sort of nod of approval and a validation of her and what she likes to do.

Damien similarly concedes that men and women have different interests; with guys into UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) and the women interested in "having a glass of wine, talking about kittens." While he is certainly being flippant, he demonstrates that he is also well aware of how women and girls are socialised into having certain interests and preoccupations. For instance, he mentions that repeatedly telling little girls they are pretty results in the need for validation on those terms persisting into women's adulthood, and he suggests that this leads to "how non-tomboys are developed." In a discussion around appropriate toys for boys and girls, Damien reveals that although he would consider it acceptable for a boy to play with dolls and a pram, the boy is far more likely to be teased as a "sissy" than a girl who is a tomboy, because tomboys are seen as "strong." In an exchange where he talks about women being prone to moaning, and of not trying new things, he says: "Men are always willing to give it a go, you know. And … with a tomboy, they're always willing to give it a go, sort of thing." He also points to shyness and lack of confidence on the part of women and girls that he clearly finds frustrating:

Damien: I do strength and conditioning classes in the morning on Tuesday's and Thursday's and, it's just, you see when new girls come in, it's … always a rigmarole, whereas new lads come in, they get straight in, they'll do the exercises, whether they can do it or not, they'll get tired, they'll stop, they'll have a break but girls… *(puts on a whining voice)* "I can't do iiitttttt," and they

complain a lot more and I think, kind of, the tomboy and the strength thing is just seen more as getting on with things.

Damien clearly valorises masculine traits, but when pushed he does articulate well aspects of social expectations that might result in a lack of confidence or assertiveness in women and girls. For instance, he recognises that boys are encouraged far more than girls to try new things. However, this "knowledge" does not really seem to translate into sympathy or understanding for women and girls. The point seems to be to get them to be more like men, with the implication being that this would be good for everyone. Crucially, though, that position does not square, for example, with his articulated wish for his girlfriend to stay at home with their (hypothetical) children.

The trope of the "tomboy" or Cool Girl is a longstanding one. Calling to mind Angela McRobbie's concept of the "sexual contract" (Angela McRobbie 2007) and the tacit pressure on women to remain silent on issues that might bother or upset them in order to maintain the veneer of modern equality between the sexes, Anne Helen Petersen (2014) likewise points to the implicit understanding that the Cool Girl, or the tomboy, never gives out or scolds or moans about her lot in life. She is "fun… never nag(s), or stay(s) home watching rom-coms; she never complain(s) or (is) scared or shy." Both Damien and Nick reference this dichotomy between the girls who are girly, scared and therefore a drag, and those who are tomboys, fun and therefore more amenable to them. While clearly it is desirable for women and girls to both be, and be considered adventurous and fun, the motif of the tomboy-cool-girl is based on a problematic foundation. The function of this arrangement, which confers on the "cool girl/tomboy" the burden of not agitating, as explored by Petersen (2014), developed out of a need to curb the disquietude that results from a shake-up of established gender relations. In other words, the emergence at different points throughout the twentieth century of various manifestations of the Cool Girl served to soften the nervousness of people worried that women "once emancipated, would become … castrating bitches" (Petersen 2014). Again, this is much the same purpose that McRobbie explains is behind the "sexual contract," in that the "advancement" of women was predicated on the condition that no further drastic rearrangements be made to the patriarchal gender order. Therefore, the tomboy-cool-girl-type reaffirms rather than threatens masculinity. It is okay for her to be outspoken and feisty, but if her outspokenness is about feminist change and challenge to male dominance, she becomes something else; she is aggressive and extremist and shrill and unattractive. As such, the visibility and voices of women are tolerated and cheered as long as they are not really championing a take-down of patriarchy. The reactions and attitudes of both male and female respondents discussed in this section suggest a valuing of the tomboy and a devaluing of the feminine. Such a valorisation of men and masculinity is significant considering their future professional lives will, in part, entail making choices about how to represent the sexes in advertising.

Conclusion

Overall, while there is strong awareness, particularly among female students, that sexual objectification of women in advertising remains problematic, such a position is more precarious when analysing the various responses from male students. The

young men interviewed indicate that they are cognisant of such a trend, but there is a degree of denial that it is something to deserve continued attention. Moreover, discussions of such problematic imagery were often greeted with a "yeah, but what about men?" response. This calling for attention to be paid to men and boys results, among some study participants, in misguided assertions that misandry is a newly emerging and unwelcome trend in contemporary advertising texts. Within these discourses and themes of sexualisation and objectification of women and men, and the spread of misandry, are contradictory and competing assertions; even within individual student positions. An intellectual or abstract knowledge of women as worthy of greater attention and concern does not result in a sense of urgency to address advertising's culpability in perpetuating stereotypes that disproportionately affect women. Rather, a type of backlash is evident in a turn away from women and girls towards a sympathy and alignment with men; something in evidence with regard to the tomboy theme and reflected in female students' tendency to side with the male protagonists in the Carlsberg advert. Less contradictory, but just as concerning, the almost total lack of interest or investment in depictions of exclusively women in domestic roles in advertising is especially noteworthy. Although there was some suggestion that one or two adverts showing men doing household chores in adverts marks a turning tide, there was an acknowledgement that women will remain the primary target, and therefore will continue to be portrayed performing those tasks in advertising campaigns. This is significant considering that these students will, as the next generation of advertisers, be in positions of shaping and designing adverts for household products, among others.

Taking all such student viewpoints, opinions, and attitudes together and attempting to proffer predictions of what can be expected from these future advertising practitioners is difficult. Nevertheless, given that they are—on the whole—unlikely to be highly critical and motivated to resist gender norms and stereotypical depictions of the sexes, it is suggested that it is unlikely for the content of advertising to change substantially in the near future. Understanding these attitudes, and how and why they manifest and emerge represents an opportunity to reflect on the ways that advertising students can be encouraged to critically examine their worldviews, so as to not perpetuate gender and sexist stereotyping when they take up work in the advertising industry. At an educational level, there is much to hope from convincing advertising program coordinators, chairs, and lecturers to invest in engaging students in a broad array of critiques of the industry and also exploring with them the ethical and moral challenges they are likely to face during their professional lives (Minette E. Drumwright and Patrick E. Murphy 2004). Moreover, encouraging the advertising educational sector to pave the way for cementing diversity as a mainstay of advertisements begins with sensitising students to that need at the very outset of their educational instruction (Kim Golombisky 2003; Diana I. Rios 2003). On that basis also, in terms of gender and its connection to advertising texts and design, increasing awareness among advertising students of the social impact of their choices offers greater likelihood for change to occur with respect to gendered advertising.

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