

**Gender identity and the consumption of visual images in  
television advertising**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we challenge the tendency to treat gender as a unitary theoretical construct; and argue for a more differentiated view of how the psychological aspects of gender influence the consumption of advertising. In a small-scale exploratory study we examine the potential impact of gender identity within consumers' self-schemas on their consumption of advertising. Bem's Sex Role Inventory was administered to twenty-five young adults who then watched video clips of two television advertisements. The focus group discussions about the two advertisements were analysed within the context of the respondents' gender schemas identified via the BEM SRI scores: masculine, feminine, androgynous or undifferentiated. Considerable support was found for the view that the centrality of gender identity to self-schemas affects how consumers process and interpret advertising. The implications for further research into the intersections amongst gender, identity and the consumption of advertising are discussed.

# Gender identity and the consumption of visual images in television advertising

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## Introduction

If men and women consume messages differently (based on their biological make-up and 'hard wiring' of the brain), and there seems to be considerable evidence that they do (see Meyers-Levy 1988); and if males and females process information differently based on the centrality of their gender identities to their self-schemas and there is evidence that they do (Markus et al 1982); - then both these biological and psychological aspects of sex and gender have potentially important implications for research into how men and women consume advertising. Most importantly, there would be arguments to support the view that "gender has been over-used as a *unitary* theoretical construct" (Freed 1996:69) not only in socio-linguistics (see for instance Bergvall, Bing and Freed 1996), but also in studies of gender, identity and the consumption of advertising.

First of all, "gender is not a homogeneous category, but involves status, identity and display"<sup>1</sup> (Lorber 1999:417) and these vary across different groups of men and women. We see gender "as derived from socialization and social context and thus potentially both multiple and fluid" (Lorber 1999:418-9) recognizing "the multiplicities and intersections of race, ethnicity, social class, and gender [which] construct a hierarchy of domination in which the same people can be both oppressed and oppressors"<sup>2</sup> (Lorber 1999:438).

Secondly gender polarization approaches tend to define "mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female" (Bem 1993:81). The adequacy of explanations based on gender polarization have been examined elsewhere (see Bem 1993:105ff). The reification of the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and their polarization as mutually exclusive has been challenged (Bem 1993:105); and in particular the underlying (and unstated) assumptions of Terman and Miles M-F test that masculinity-femininity "is a core dimension of the human personality; .. [and that they] are opposite ends of a single dimension and hence that a person must be either masculine or feminine but not both" (Bem 1993:106). This provides support for arguing that gender polarization has provided only restricted perspectives on the impact of gender on the consumption of advertising.

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<sup>1</sup> "Gender status – being taken as a man or a woman – in Western society implies dominance and assertiveness. Gender identity – the sense of self as a man or a woman, which can have various sexual identifications – presents interaction and legal issues. Gender display – being feminine versus being masculine according to postindustrial norms and expectations – involves sexualised behavior and appearance" (Lorber 1999:417)

<sup>2</sup> "A group identity is forged by socialization, education, economic and political opportunities, cultural values, history, place of residence, and sexual orientation, and that being a woman or man intertwines with and shapes these experiences. To the extent that gender continues to structure social orders and power imbalances, it will be a prime organizing force in individual and group identity and in the social patterning of sexual behavior. But as postmodern theorists have shown, gender itself is a problematic category (Butler 1990; Flax 1987)" (Lorber 1999:438).

In this exploratory study we seek to extend earlier research (Markus et al 1982) on the ‘information processing consequences of self-schemas about gender’ (Markus et al 1982:38) to an examination of the impact of self-schemas about gender on the consumption of advertising.

Whilst we know that men and women consumers respond in different ways to ostensibly the same stimuli, much advertising research has assumed that consumers all interpret advertisements in the same or similar ways (Stern and Holbrook 1994). With one or two exceptions (e.g. Stern and Holbrook 1994) there has been little systematic examination of the impact of gender identity on the consumption of advertising; or on the different styles of information processing and interpretation that men and women bring to understanding advertising meanings. Whilst some advertising research has addressed differences in information processing between men and women (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991); other authors (e.g. Fischer and Arnold 1994:167-8) have challenged the tendency for consumer behavior researchers to conflate sex, gender identity and gender role attitudes in their studies. They emphasized the need to explore how far “male and female subjects identified predominantly with masculine and feminine traits, respectively” (Fischer and Arnold 1994:168). We pursue this issue in our research design by using Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (1977) to identify the masculine and feminine dimensions of our respondents; and this provides the framework for our subsequent analysis of their responses to the advertising cues in the video clips which they viewed and discussed.

#### *Gender and Self Schemas*

Bem (1974:155) conceptualised masculinity and femininity as separate, independent dimensions; and argued that “many individuals might be ‘androgynous’; that is, they might be *both* masculine and feminine, *both* assertive and expressive – depending on the situational appropriateness of these various behaviors”. Subsequent research identified two categories of individuals who have been variously described as high and low androgynous, or androgynous and undifferentiated (Bem 1977:84). “The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem 1974) assesses masculinity and femininity in terms of the respondent’s self-perceived possession of positive personality characteristics having sex-typed social desirability. It can also be used as a measure of gender schematicity in that it assesses the extent to which respondents spontaneously sort self-relevant information into distinct masculine and feminine categories” (Lenney 1991:582). Bem SRI (1977) has been widely used; and has been demonstrated to have “excellent reliability” (Lenney 1991:582) and quite good validity (Lenney 1991).

Linked to the debate about using gender as a unitary construct (Freed 1996:69), is the issue of the centrality of gender to individuals as they consume goods and services in the marketplace, including advertising. “Self-schemas are knowledge structures developed to understand, integrate, or explain one’s behavior in a particular domain” (Markus et al, 1982:38). Markus et al (1982:38 & 48) explored the consequences of self-schemas about gender on information processing; and observed “systematic differences in cognitive performance among groups of individuals identified as masculine schematics, feminine schematics, low androgynous and high androgynous”. This provides support for arguments from other areas of social science, such as socio-linguistics, against regarding males and females as homogeneous groups, and thus treating gender as a unitary construct when discussing men’s and women’s consumption of advertising. Following Markus et al’s results (1982:38 & 48) it could be argued that schematics would probably encode schema consistent information quickly (such as the male and female characters’ behaviour in advertisements) and organise incoming information in schema relevant categories, thus influencing the processing and interpretation of the

advertising messages and, consequently, the preference for the brand. However, where information was not consistent or relevant, then this would also affect the processing and interpretation of advertising messages, but potentially in an adverse way compared with schema consistent information. The processing and interpretation of information in advertising messages would be influenced by the centrality of gender to the self schemas of the consumers of the advertising.

## **Methodology**

### *Research objective*

The research objectives were: to establish the centrality of gender identity in the self-schemas of a group of young adult consumers (using BEM SRI 1977); and to examine the potential effect of these psychological differences in gender identity within self-schemas on the respondents' processing and interpretation of advertising content (by analysing the focus group discussions).

### *Recruitment of participants*

As the research objective was to test the application of theory (derived from Markus et al 1982) a homogeneous group (Calder, Philips and Tybout 1981; Miles and Huberman 1994:28) of twenty-five young adults (13 women and 12 men aged between 19 and 22 from two universities in the North West of England) was recruited, using a snow-balling technique, for the four focus groups.

### *Measures*

We used one of 'the standard measures of gender identity' (Fischer and Arnold 1994:168) Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem 1974) to elicit gender identity. BSRI consists of sixty personality characteristics which are divided amongst three subscales (twenty items each): a Masculinity scale, a Femininity scale and a Social Desirability scale which consisted of "completely neutral [items] with respect to sex" (Bem 1974:156). "The BSRI characterizes a person as masculine, feminine or androgynous [i.e. both masculine and feminine] as a function of the difference between his or her endorsement of masculine and feminine personality characteristics. A person is thus sex typed, whether masculine or feminine, to the extent that this difference score is high, and androgynous, to the extent that this difference score is low" (Bem 1974:156). However, we follow the median split approach to scoring (as debated in her later paper, Bem 1977) where respondents who score highly on masculine and feminine dimensions are categorized as androgynous; and those who score low on these dimensions are described as 'undifferentiated' (Lenney 1991:589). The respondents indicate their agreement on a seven point Likert-type scale which ranges from 1 ("Never or almost never true") to 7 ("Always or almost always true") and is labelled at each point.

### *Advertisements*

Two video clips of car advertisements (the Fiat Punto [Advert 1] and the Volkswagen Golf [Advert 2] – see the illustrations at the end) were used as stimulus material for exploring how these young adults processed and interpreted the meaning of advertisements. Car adverts were chosen because previous studies have found a strong relationship between self-concept and car preferences (Birdwell 1968; Ross 1971; Grubb and Stern 1971). Earlier research (Belk, Bahn and Meyer 1982) has also suggested that college students draw more distinct inferences about car preferences compared with older consumers. Advertisements were selected which appealed to both men and women. The criteria for choosing the

advertisements drew on Goffman (1976) and on the information collected about gender and gender advertisements during pre-testing.

The Fiat Punto advertisement (Advert 1<sup>3</sup>) was chosen, firstly because there were two main characters (a man and a woman) who provided two clearly differentiated sets of gender-relevant information. It was expected that there would be different responses to this gender-relevant information depending on the centrality of the gender identity to the respondents' self-schemas. Secondly, because the information was not explicitly obvious, participants would be able to engage in elaborative or selective information processing of the advertising messages; and it was expected that this would differ according to gender identity/self-schemas.

The Volkswagen Golf advertisement (Advert 2<sup>4</sup>) was chosen primarily because of the absence of a central male character. This meant that participants would be invited to embellish on much of the 'missing' information within the advert. A marked difference was expected to be found amongst the feminine, masculine and androgynous schematics towards the central female character.

#### *Focus Group Procedure*

The focus group discussions lasted approximately one hour, and were held in an informal environment in order to promote informal social group interaction. The session began with participants completing the BEM SRI (1977). Each video clip was played twice: once at the beginning of the session (after the completion of the BSRI), and for a second time towards the close of the session. A set of questions had been identified from the literature review and were used as a semi-structured script for the discussion. Four focus groups were held: two with male participants; and two with female participants.

#### *Analysis of Focus Group Discussions*

The focus group discussions were taped and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed iteratively using the three phases of reduction, display and conclusion-drawing/verification identified for qualitative data analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994:10ff). The transcripts were read repeatedly (Miles and Huberman 1994:8) to understand the meanings and interpretations which the participants brought to their consumption of the advertising presented in the video clips. An analytic framework was derived from the semi-structured script, and this was used for the initial data reduction and display. The participants' comments were then clustered and grouped (Miles and Huberman 1994:248) within the context of the gender identity/self-schemas identified by the Bem SRI scores (masculine; feminine; androgynous and undifferentiated). The sets of comments from each subgroup of participants were then compared and contrasted (Miles and Huberman 1994:254) in terms of their responses to the two different advertising scenarios. The sets of comments were then reviewed within the context of reported findings from earlier studies, in order to confront the findings with existing theory and formalized knowledge (Miles and Huberman 1994:9).

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2

## Findings

### *Gender identity and self schemas*

The results of the Bem SRI were compiled according to the matrix below (Figure 1) using the median scoring approach based on Bem's normative samples: median score of 4.89 for masculinity; and median score of 4.76 for Femininity<sup>5</sup>(reported in Lenney 1991:589):

**Figure 1**

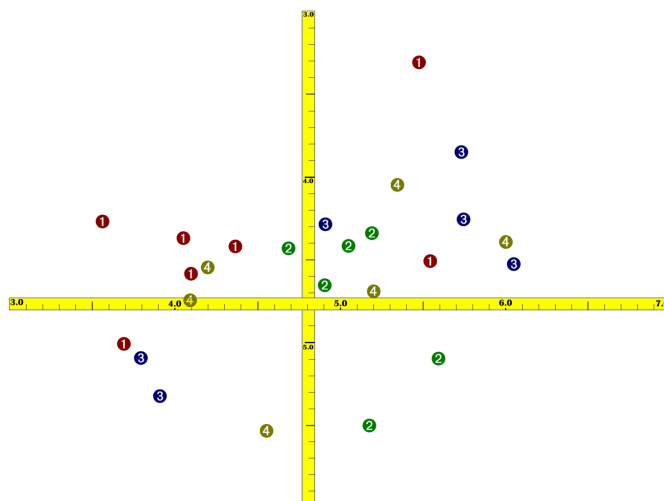
**Bem's SRI matrix**

		Masculinity Score	
		<i>Below Median</i>	<i>Above Median</i>
Femininity Score	<i>Below Median</i>	Undifferentiated	Masculine
	<i>Above Median</i>	Feminine	Androgynous

The profile of the 25 participants (13 female and 12 male) using the BSRI was as follows (Figure 2):

**Figure 2**

**Gender identity in self-schemas for all the participants**



<sup>5</sup> These median scores were derived from a 1975 sample of 375 males and 290 females of Stanford University (Lenney 1991:589); and this student body would not be greatly different (in terms of age, socio economic standing, and level of education) from the respondents in this study.

Key to Figure 2<sup>6</sup>: 4 Feminine; 12 Masculine; 2 Androgynous; 7 Undifferentiated.

The results are summarized below (Table 1):

**Table 1**  
**Respondents' gender schema classification**  
**(derived from their Bem SRI scores)**

		<b>Gender Schema</b>			
		Masculine	Feminine	Androgynous	Undifferentiated
Number and sex of respondents	♂	6 Males	1 Male	2 Males	3 Males
	♀	6 Females	3 Females	0 Females	4 Females

Nearly half the participants (6 men and 6 women) characterised themselves as masculine. Two men identified themselves as androgynous respondents. One man and three women were categorized as feminine respondents. Three men and four women were undifferentiated.

***Focus Group Discussions of the Advertisements***

The findings are presented under two headings, with supporting extracts from the focus group discussions. The discussion of the advertisements are presented within the context of the gender identity/self schemas (masculine; feminine; androgynous and undifferentiated) of the participants identified from their Bem SRI scores.

*Gendered information processing and the elaboration of message cues*

Firstly, feminine schematic respondents engaged in imaginative associative processing of the presented message cues, which supported previous reports (e.g. Meyers-Levy 1988:251). For instance, prompted by questions that invited participants to imaginatively interpret the advertisements, feminine respondents generated numerous reflections which enhanced the advertising message and extended the characters' images beyond what was explicitly stated in the advert. This was particularly evident in discussion of the Volkswagen *Golf* advertisement where the absence of the male character led to the following inference:

*“I would say he bought her it [the Golf] as a present. He owed her that after all he’s put her through”.*

Nowhere in the advertisement is it stated that the absent man ‘owes’ the woman. This conclusion stems from the feminine tendency to generate subjective inferences on the basis of featured objective message cues (Meyers-Levy 1988:251ff).

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<sup>6</sup>Please note that the numbers in the circles in Figure 2 refer to the focus group that the respondent participated in.

Secondly, feminine processing often encompassed substantial, detailed elaboration of the message content, which supported earlier research (Anastasi and Foley 1949; Entwistle and Garvey 1972; Meyers-Levy 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991). The feminine schematics drew on a wide range of external information in analysing the advertisements. They drew associative thoughts and images from personal experience in judging both the advert and the brand. For example, one feminine respondent identified the following themes when interpreting the adverts: the feminist movement; popular culture; female attractiveness; male and female role reversal; her personal driving experience; women drivers in general; general car aesthetics; the target markets of the Volkswagen Golf; women's treatment of their cars.

In contrast, the 'masculine' schematics processed the information presented in the advertisements by focusing selectively on the objective rather than subjective cues (supporting Meyers-Levy 1988). This was highlighted by the following answer to a question about whether the central female character in the Golf advert worked:

"There are three, four, five different possibilities and the advert doesn't go deep enough to let you know this, for any one person to make a definite conclusion".

However when the questions were more closely related to the car, male 'masculine' respondents were more likely to engage in elaborative processing. For example when asked to speculate about who owned the Punto, a male 'masculine' informant replied:

"I think they both have equal right over who can drive it. They're both insured on it but I think she was driving it because at that point he wasn't able to" [the respondent then explained that this was because the male character was drunk].

This willingness to undertake more detailed elaboration may be explained by the male tendency to regard cars as significantly expressive of themselves. Consumers, and especially men (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982), attribute unique characteristics to the owners of different types of car. Cars have product characteristics that maximise the likelihood that consumer choices in that product class will be used by men as cues to the owners' personalities and social strata.

Female 'masculine' typed individuals, whilst they did not react to cars in the same way as their male 'masculine' peers, did display a more elaborative image laced approach (Wood 1966, cited in Meyers-Levy 1988) to the interpretation of personal relationships within the chosen adverts. Although they did not engage in such rich deliberations as the 'feminine' respondents, they appeared (just as male 'masculine' respondents concerning cars) to be willing to offer more alternative possibilities and explanations.

The androgynous respondents' (both male and female) elaboration of message cues was similar to that of the feminine participants. They tended to draw from a similar amount of personal experience and external world information as the feminine respondents. In general there was no substantive differences that could be discerned in this study between the feminine and androgynous informants concerning information processing techniques.

The undifferentiated respondents' (both male and female) elaboration of message cues was markedly different from any of the other groups (masculine, feminine or androgynous). The undifferentiated participants contributed much less to the group discussions. They were never the first to offer an opinion about the advertisements. Even when prompted they only gave

the shortest of answers, and made little attempt to elaborate on statements. The undifferentiated participants seemed to be more likely to react to the opinions of their fellow informants.

#### Gendered information processing and analysis of advertising messages

Earlier research (Gilligan 1982; Meyers-Levy 1988; Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991) has proposed that assigning different products to alternative sub-categories has a significant effect on the interpretation of advertising messages by men and women. From this earlier research it would be expected that female respondents would focus on the apparent contradictions within the stimulus adverts; would judge these comparisons (for example the very rich woman driving the comparatively inexpensive Volkswagen *Golf* and the apparently well off young couple driving a *Punto*) to be incongruent; and would potentially evaluate the brand in the advert negatively. It is also suggested, drawing on previous research, that male respondents would not necessarily identify these contradictions.

In our study, feminine respondents tended to establish narrow categories within which to process the advertising information. One informant, for instance, suggested about the *Punto* advert:

“The house gives the impression of a couple that are quite rich, even his possessions like the cricket trophy, the guitar and the drums all suggest quite expensive hobbies and yet they bought a car like a *Punto*. It doesn't seem to make sense”.

The context for the focal brand (the *Punto*) invited females to engage in comprehensive elaboration of the visual cues, and the opportunity to identify potential contradictions arose. A similar pattern was noted for the Volkswagen *Golf* advert where a feminine respondent argued:

“I thought the car [the *Golf*] would be a lot better....for what she was wearing I wouldn't imagine her in a car like that”

The other feminine respondents also challenged the appropriateness of the brand identity and brand image in the advert because it was felt the women should have been driving more expensive cars. A direct comparison was made between the focal brand and the brand that these feminine respondents perceived would be better suited to the women in the adverts. This prompted the viewpoint that the women and the cars belonged to alternative sub-categories and therefore the presentation of the Fiat *Punto* and Volkswagen *Golf* cars was viewed as incongruent, inviting negative evaluation of the focal brand. The number of apparent inconsistencies drawn from the advert by the feminine respondents meant that the advertising message was deemed to be illogical. All the feminine respondents tended to dislike both the advert and the focal brand for the Fiat *Punto* (Advert 1).

Masculine respondents also identified some apparent contradictions in the advertisements, although earlier research had suggested that men process information through more inclusive categories than females. If male processing is characterised by broad comprehensive sub-categories it would be expected that they would not recognize the contradictions that were so readily identified by the feminine respondents. A masculine respondent commented on the *Golf* advert (Advert 2):

“It was quite funny the way she strutted out all high society and then got into a Golf, which I’m sure was second hand! But the car was not right. She wouldn’t have been seen dead in that car!”

The masculine respondents therefore identified some potential contradictions concerning the specific models of cars and the owners within both advertisements. The androgynous participants, like the masculine and feminine respondents, noticed some contradictions within the Punto advertisement. However they did not identify any apparent contradictions in the Golf advert. The undifferentiated respondents, in contrast, did not notice any apparent contradictions in the advertisements.

## **Discussion**

Nearly half the participants (6 men and 6 women) characterised themselves as masculine. It was expected that this group would selectively concentrate on the more focal and tangible information (Meyers-Levy 1988) in the advertisements. The androgynous respondents (two men) were not expected to process information on specific gendered lines. The feminine labelled respondents (1 man and three women) were expected to employ a more imagery laced and creative interpretation of the cues presented in the adverts (Meyers-Levy 1988).

### **Elaboration of message cues**

Firstly, in the elaboration of message cues, feminine individuals did establish more sub-categories in comparison to the selective masculine processors who established broad categories within which to process information (supporting Glixman 1965 cited in Meyers-Levy 1988).

Previous research (Meyers-Levy 1988; Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1990; Stern and Holbrook 1994) has also suggested that males’ processing is often characterised by a ‘greater use of efficiency striving heuristics’ (Meyers-Levy 1988) and that males concentrate on more focal and tangible information (Meyers-Levy 1988). However this study suggests that masculine and feminine respondents do not differ so much in their use of elaborative processing, as in the level of their interest thresholds that lead to engaging in elaborative processing. It appears that when gender differences emerge in the elaborative processing of advertisements it is more likely to be because the masculine interest threshold for elaboration has not been reached or triggered for that particular product category. That is, masculine typed individuals are often not interested enough in the advertised product or topic to motivate them to engage in detailed, sensitive information processing. When masculine and feminine respondents exhibit similar knowledge and interest in a message topic (e.g. cars) - providing the masculine interest level is exceeded - gender differences would not necessarily emerge in their use of message cues.

Therefore, although feminine individuals may be more likely to elaborate on and consider the particulars of a message claim than masculine respondents, the difference between masculine and feminine processing seemed to be eliminated when message characteristics were relevant to the personal interest of the individual. When masculine respondents are interested in the subject they seem willing to invest more meaning and a greater level of interpretation into their consumption of advertisements.

### *Centrality of gender to self-schemas*

Secondly, androgynous participants were responsive to gender relevant stimuli. However androgynous respondents probably have very different overall self schemas (Markus et al 1982) and both knowledge structures (the masculine and the feminine) may be equally accessible for the processing of advertising information. However, “whether one, the other, or both will drive processing is dependent on the circumstances and the nature of the situation” (Markus et al 1982:49). The differences identified in the responses from the androgynous informants may be due to social and motivational affects, linked to the discussion groups.

### *Undifferentiated aschematic respondents*

Thirdly, the information on the undifferentiated respondents suggested that they do not use the domain of masculinity or femininity in thinking about themselves when they process information (Markus et al 1982). They could therefore be viewed as aschematic with respect to gender (Markus et al 1982:49-50). Undifferentiated individuals tended to show less confidence in making gender relevant judgements and as a result were more likely to react to the opinions of fellow informants rather than drawing information from their own self concept when discussing advertisements. This suggests that when gender is missing from the self schema construct of the individual, information is drawn from the dominant social group in order to bridge this gap and interpret the advertising message. This highlights the potential influence that peers (e.g. via word of mouth) can have on individuals when domain relevant information is missing or incomplete.

### *Gender, Identity and the Consumption of Advertising*

Finally, several implications for advertisers and marketers might be drawn from these findings. Firstly, and most importantly, these masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated groups are not always isomorphic with biological sex. Advertisers often perform their activities differently when targeting men from when they target women, responding to sex based biological differences. However the evidence suggests that consumer responses also often differ on the basis of psychologically based self-schemas of gender identity; as well as on the level of product category involvement.

Secondly, masculine sex typed individuals, under certain circumstances, may be less likely to access or use the information presented within a given advertisement. This would suggest that in order to accommodate the masculine tendency toward selective processing, marketing practitioners may have to develop messages that focus on product attributes that imply a single concept (as suggested by Meyers-Levy 1989). However, when advertising products of considerable interest to a masculine typed market, the advertiser may be able to present a myriad of detailed and specific product features without fear that information will be overlooked. Level of product category involvement could be an important moderating factor in influencing how this group respond to advertising. Marketing managers need to recognize the moderating impact of level of product involvement on the willingness of this group to process and interpret advertising messages and cues.

Thirdly, message cues should not belong to alternative sub-categories. Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) argue that the products / brands which are explicitly presented and compared within an advert should not belong to alternative sub-categories. However this study suggests that focal brands and their *implicitly* stated positioning - for example the association of a particular make of car with its owner - should also be scrutinised to ensure that they do not belong to alternative sub-categories. Because feminine typed individuals (and masculine

typed individuals providing the interest threshold is exceeded) make fine distinctions between product categories, they may regard the two cues (cars and their owners) as belonging to different sub-categories and thus may regard any resultant message claims as potentially conflicting and incongruent.

Fourthly, the willingness of feminine schematics to engage in detailed and substantial elaboration of message content, and to draw on a wide range of external information when analyzing the advertisements offers a significant opportunity for marketers. By implanting messages rich in symbol laden cues, feminine schematics may be induced to generate positive enumerations that permeate and thus define the image of the product (Meyers-Levy 1988).

### *Limitations*

Few studies have used moving rather than still images in their examination of the consumption (i.e. processing and interpretation) of advertising meaning, and this represents an important innovation in this research design, which could be usefully pursued and developed in other studies. However the use of existing advertisements meant that no control could be established over respondents' prior experience of the advertisements; and this represents a potential limitation of this study. Future research might try to control for prior experience of specific advertisements by developing video clips of advertisements specifically for a study.

A number of issues surround the use (or overuse, see Rook 2000) of focus groups for data collection in interpretive studies. Social interaction effects of focus groups also need to be acknowledged. Group discussions might help promote understanding of the advertisements and the advertising messages; but respondents might also be wary of revealing their views, in case they are exposed as lacking in understanding, or holding to a different (and possibly unpopular) view point. In addition, where feminine schematics are out-numbered they may not be given the freedom to engage in elaborations during the focus group discussions; and might feel unable to undertake extensive and detailed interpretation because of social interactions within the group, for instance if there are more masculine schematic participants, who tend to be more heuristic processors. Respondents often also engage in impression management in this type of social setting, and might 'modify or even reverse their position after interacting with others' (Krueger 1994:36).

We also recognize and acknowledge that the concept of androgyny has been much debated since its introduction (see Bem 1993:118ff). However we agree with Bem (1993:118) that the 'early theoretical and empirical work on androgyny did challenge the longstanding psychological assumptions about masculinity-femininity'. And our study is consistent with that approach as we have used the two aspects of androgyny (androgynous and undifferentiated) to try and demonstrate that gender polarization offers a very narrow way of understanding and exploring the impact of gender on the consumption of advertising.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper we have sought to 'turn around' (Wilson and Rossman 1985:633) the idea of using gender polarization as a unitary variable in exploring men and women's consumption of advertising (both the processing and the interpretation of advertising messages). In this endeavour we support earlier calls from Bem (1993) and Freed (1996) to challenge:

“the imposition of gender polarization on our world [which] reinforces similarities among women where actually differences exist, creates the impression of difference between the sexes where little would otherwise be found, supports and strengthens androcentrism by fostering an essentialist view of male and female styles of thinking, of speaking, of playing, of dressing etc., which is accompanied by a view of maleness as the norm, and finally ‘turns men and women into gender caricatures’ ([Bem] 1993:194) whereby women and men acquire ‘the idea of being a “real” man or woman as opposed to a merely biological man or woman (194)’” (Freed 1996:69).

With this exploratory study we have also tried to extend earlier research (Markus et al 1982) into the ‘information processing consequences of self-schemas about gender’ (Markus et al 1982:38) into a study of the intersections between gender, identity and the consumption of advertising. These initial findings support the view that “there are important differences among individuals in how gender-relevant knowledge may be organized” (Markus et al 1982:50); and also suggest that respondents with gender linked schemas are likely to bring different information processing strategies to bear when consuming advertising messages. The next stage is to pursue the path shown by research in other areas (e.g. psychology (Bem 1993), socio-linguistics (Freed 1996)), firstly by adopting a more differentiated approach to gender when exploring gender, identity and consumption; and secondly by recognizing that the influence of gender needs to be understood also within the intersections of other factors such as culture, race and class in order to provide a more contingent and necessarily complex view of consumers, markets and consumption.



A man criticises his female companion's driving

She glares at him whilst he is sleeping



She passes a comical photograph...



...as she drags a drum kit and other possessions down the stairs.



He wakes to the sound of her driving



She is driving around dangerously close to his possessions



She continues to drive....



...and he continues to try and protect his possessions



He apologises for criticising her driving...



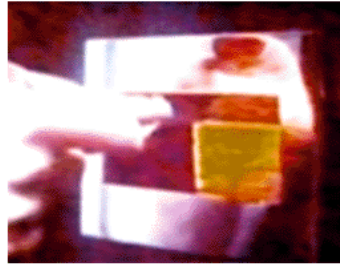
...but is he forgiven?



Appendix 1: Advert 1



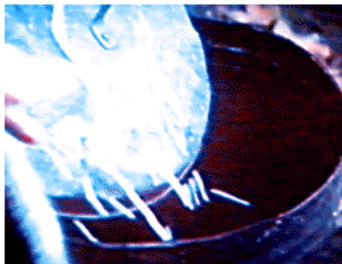
A woman walks out of a house



Turning, she posts a ring back through the letterbox



She walks along the road



Throwing away her pearls



..and flinging her brooch in the bin (Narrowly missing a cat)



Then she leaves her fur coat on a parking meter



She begins to throw her car keys down the drain



But then she smiles and hesitates



She decides to keep the car



The fog clears...



and she smiles.



Appendix 2: Advert 2

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