

Krzysztof Arcimowicz*

GENDER AND BODY. ESTABLISHING AND BLURRING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CULTURE – ON THE EXAMPLE OF ADVERTISING

Introduction

Socio-cultural changes in the Western world contributed to the growth of interest in the body and the recognition of its importance for people. It has become one of the main topics in science and social life. The body is one of the main components of the formation of gender identity and its appearance, size, and, as Chris Schilling puts it, “external surfaces” symbolize the identity (Shilling 2010, p. 17). Our standards of beauty and attractiveness are largely shaped by gender (Kimmel 2015, p. 446).

The last decades of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century saw a proliferation of ways to form both male and female bodies. One can say that today for many people the body has become their personal project. However, the project is continuously and strongly affected by various socio-cultural factors (see Shilling 2010, p. 19). Idealised images of female and male bodies are a common feature of mass media messages, especially advertising, and they often affect the perception of the recipients concerning their own bodies (see Kimmel 1992, p. XI-XII; Connell 2013, pp. 95-97). Commercial advertising is aimed at maximizing financial profits through increasing consumption, but its messages can also be analysed as a special type of cultural practice which reflects gender discourses that are widespread in cultural debate.

The main purpose of the article is to characterize discourse strategies¹ pertaining to the presentation of male and female bodies in modern advertising and to describe how the images of body contribute to the creation or blurring of gendered differences. The article will also attempt to show the causes and consequences of the presence of stereotypical and new body images in advertising.

* **Krzysztof Arcimowicz**, dr hab. prof. UwB – University of Białystok, Institute of Cultural Studies, Poland; e-mail: krzysiek@uwb.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3318-2421>.

¹ In line with the views of one of the most prominent representatives of critical discourse analysis, Ruth Wodak, one can say that discourse strategy means systematically repeated ways of using an image or language; it is a more or less defined, consciously adopted program of action aimed at achieving specific social, political, psychological or commercial goals (see Wodak 2008, p.195).

Theoretical background

I assume that the categories of femininity and masculinity are not essential, established once and for all, but dynamic, and subject to cultural debate. They are prone to change in time and space, which means that depending on the place (culture) and time (historical era) different sets of roles and qualities can arise that are attributed to men and women (Connell 1987; Melosik 1996; Arcimowicz 2003; Kimmel 2015). Similar assumptions are made with reference to the body. I do not think the body is just a biological phenomenon. In modern culture, two interrelated processes are visible; on the one hand, the embodiment of gender, and on the other hand, the gendering of body. A person functioning in a certain cultural and historical environment is exposed to various influences of social life, which can lead to the modification of his own body and its transformation in accordance with existing trends (Buczowski 2005, p. 108; Shilling 2010, pp. 19-26; Connell 2013, pp. 96-100).

One of the most famous and influential theories concerning gender, the so-called concept of hegemonic masculinity, often used in the analysis of mass media messages, was developed in the 1980s by Raewyn Connell. The sociologist defines hegemonic masculinity as a “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of the Patriarch, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women” (Connell 1995, p. 77). According to the Australian author, it is impossible to speak of one invariable category of masculinity but of masculinities which depend on historical, socio-cultural or geographical conditions. Connell believes that there can be a wide variety of masculinity types in a given culture, but only one version is dominant.

Hegemonic masculinity is one of the three main versions of modern Euro-American societies. The main constitutional components of hegemonic masculinity are heterosexuality, authority, dominance, the fact of occupying high positions in the social hierarchy, as well as physical strength. The researcher suggests that the described version is an ideal model to which men aspire. However, most men are not able to implement all of the attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity; many of them create subsequent versions: complicit masculinity and subordinate masculinity (Connell 1995, pp. 77-90).

In the theory proposed by Connell the masculinities are arranged hierarchically. The top is occupied by hegemonic masculinity which the author associates, among other things, with physical strength and the bottom by subordinate masculinity which is connected with homosexuality, “unmanly” behaviour and looks (this category includes, among others, androgynous men). Connell believes that all categories of femininity occupy positions subordinated to hegemonic masculinity. The Australian researcher

emphasizes the importance of the body in the context of strengthening the existing gender hierarchy and maintaining the social status quo (Connell 2013)².

A systematic analysis of ways of representing the body in modern Western culture cannot be encompassed in just one theory. Connell's theory presents a theoretical framework but is unable to describe and explain all the aspects of body image in late modern societies. I think several theoretical perspectives are helpful in extracting other senses concerning female and male bodies in advertising, such as: Foucault's theory of knowledge/power and the discursive creation of body (2002, 2009), the critique of consumer society by Jean Baudrillard (2006) and Zygmunt Bauman (2008), or Goffman's concept of hyper-ritualization in the media (1979)³.

Creating and maintaining gender differences through body

One of the first systematic analyses of images of women and men, as well as ways to represent the male and female body in advertising was the work of Erving Goffman called *Gender Advertisements* which presented the results of the analysis of about 700 press advertisements (Goffman 1979). Despite the fact that forty years have passed since the publication of this study, many of the author's ideas remain relevant to this day, and the work is now considered classical. Later studies concerning body images and gender in press advertisements and television commercials (Bell & Milic, 2002; Arcimowicz 2003; Dzienniak-Pulina 2005) largely confirm Goffman's theses which attests to the strength of gender stereotypes in the culture and the fact that it is difficult to change them.

According to the American sociologist, the creators of advertising messages refer to the rituals of social life. Advertising does not create gender stereotypes, it only takes advantage of them in order to sell the product more easily. Goffman believes that advertising, depicting the everyday life behaviour of people and duplicating the stereotypical concepts of social roles, forms hyper-ritualization (Goffman 1979, p. 26).

The author of *Gender Advertisements* draws attention to nonverbal codes related to the body which, in his opinion, reinforce gender stereotypes. Having studied gender images Goffman states that if they present situations in which all family members sit together, for example on a sofa, or a couple stands on the beach, then often the man wraps his arm around his wife/partner. This gesture can both mean the care for the

² Due to social changes and the criticism it met, the theory of hegemonic masculinity was reformulated in the first decade of this century (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, pp. 829-854). However, most of the main assumptions have not undergone significant changes and they have been applied in this article.

³ Given the limited scope of the article, it is not possible to discuss all the theories in detail, but when analysing female and male body, and wherever it will seem necessary, I shall refer to them.

woman or family but it can also symbolize his dominance. In many advertisements, women are depicted in children's poses: they have crossed feet, they sit with their legs tucked under, they cover their faces with their hands. According to the sociologist, this type of bodily expressiveness is not related to the category of masculinity in advertising, because masculinity means mainly power and authority. Another difference is related to the more common representation of smiling women than men. According to the researcher, a smile in Western culture is one of the gestures of gentleness, and this trait is often connected with femininity (Goffman 1979, pp. 37-61).

A very important discourse strategy associated with the body, used for creating and perpetuating gender distinctions is the strategy of difference in the appearance of the female and male body. Goffman claims that in the vast majority of advertisements men are higher than women and men's bodies are larger than women's. A cursory consideration of this phenomenon suggests that differences in body size and height of men and women in advertising are a natural reflection of biological differences. However, the American sociologist believes that the way male and female bodies are presented in the texts of advertising is primarily related to gender hierarchy and a higher social status of men over women (Goffman 1979, pp. 28-29).

An in-depth analysis of height, musculature, and proportions of female and male bodies in the context of socio-cultural gendering of the body and the establishment of gender differences was performed by Raewyn Connell. The Australian sociologist, analysing these discourse strategies in her work *Gender and Power*, argues that culture gives bodies a qualitatively new meaning that cannot be justified by referring only to their biological design. The vast majority of advertisements and other media messages remove bodily similarities of women and men and exaggerate the differences. This could be referred to as a kind of "gender training" (Connell 1987, p. 134; Shilling 2010, pp. 119-124). Connell points out that adult men are on average slightly taller than adult women, but compared to that average height differences within each sex are much greater. This means that many women are taller than many men. However, most TV commercials, newspaper advertisements and billboards depict women as shorter or much shorter than men. In addition, the male body in advertising is most often muscular and the female body is slim or very slim (Connell 2013, p. 96).

In Western culture, the vast majority of men consider the mesomorph body type to be the standard⁴, as for women – it is a slim body (Mishkind, et al., 1987, pp. 38-45; Grogan 1999; Kimmel 2015, pp. 447-453; Majer 2016, pp. 194-196). Gender researchers argue that masculinity is created relationally by showing the difference between "real"

⁴ Mesomorph is one of the three main body types described by Harvard psychologist William Sheldon. It is characterised by a proportional figure, and a well-musclcd body, deprived of visible adipose tissue.

men and those who are not entitled to be them and between men and women (Connell 1987, pp. 186-187; Kimmel 1987, pp. 12-13; Bourdieu 2004, pp. 33-36). A muscular physique is still associated with a strong psyche and courage by a large part of society. The ideal of a slim or very slim female body represents the other side of this phenomenon. The slim body of a woman connotes such qualities as weakness, gentleness and subordination which are contrasted with male power and strength. According to some contemporary culture analysts, the image of the mesomorphic body has been made obligatory because there has been an increase in women's participation in the public sphere and differences between masculine and feminine roles have started to disappear. Thus, showing male musculature is a way to emphasize differences between men and women (Mishkind et al. 1987, p. 39)⁵.

It is worth noting that in some commercials, especially of underwear and cosmetics, gender distinctions are created and perpetuated through the use of images which show the difference between the external genital organs of women and men (for example, in some underwear ads the penis seems to be fully erect). The social definition of men as endowed with power, often accompanied by phallic symbols, translates into images of the body and this is one of the basic ways to naturalise the power of men (Bordo 1999, p. 26; Connell 1987, p. 85).

Now I would like to present the results of the analysis of the content of Fashion TV programs. From March 2 to March 11, 2012, I recorded episodes of two television programmes *Models* and *I See It First* which showed the exact measurements of female models as well as their age and even eye colour. Models shown on Fashion TV take part in advertising campaigns of the world's most famous brands and are an inspiration for many young women. Based on the analysis of the measurements of 53 people, I could try and create a profile of the modern model: height: 176-182 cm; bust: 80-90 cm; waist about 60 cm or less; hips: 80-90 cm. Interestingly, the weight of the models was not shown in the analysed programs, but one may guess that the BMI (body mass index) in many cases bordered on underweight. Michael Kimmel (2015, p. 448) reported that the height of participants of beauty contests and models has not changed over the past few decades, but when it comes to the weight the differences are large – women are becoming slimmer and slimmer.

A rather new phenomenon is advertising that violates the stereotype of a slim model, such as the advertisements of some Dove products or “plus-size” advertising campaigns in which there appear women with the endomorph body type, or even obesity. However,

⁵ Mesomorphic body as a canon of beauty appeared as long ago as the 5th century BC in the art of Ancient Greece (see Clark, 1998, p. 30-39). However, at present the number of images of the mesomorphic body that a man living in Western culture encounters is incomparably greater than before.

it should be added that this type of advertising is a niche and does not significantly undermine the dominant discourse of a slim female body.

At this point it is worth mentioning Michel Foucault who claims that the body is a discursive construct, but “in every society the production of discourse is simultaneously controlled, selected, organized and redistributed through a number of procedures” (Foucault 2002, p. 7). One can say that in culture there is a struggle of different forms of knowledge as to which of them is the true knowledge of the body. These forms of knowledge are part of the discourse of advertising, science or politics. The purpose of the struggle is to obtain the status of truth and thus to define the body. The struggle for the state of current knowledge about the body is therefore a struggle for power over the body, for obtaining the right to shape it and to give certain meanings to it. The body is always defined through cultural and social processes and becomes a real “product” of the discourses that construct them (see Foucault 2009; Melosik 1996, pp. 65-66; Shilling 2010, p. 92).

One must not forget that popular models of the female and male body are associated with consumerism. Baudrillard argues that when capitalism socialised the masses as workforce, it had to move on and begin to control it as a consumer force. Consumer society critics, such as Baudrillard or Bauman, think that the way people are shaped by modern society is subordinated, above all, to the role of the consumer they have to play. The body in this project is primarily an organ of consumption and the measure of its proper state is the ability to absorb and assimilate all that the consumer society has to offer (Baudrillard 2006, pp. 75-88; Bauman 2008, pp. 98-100).

Images of idealized men and women that appear in advertisements are used to optimise the sale of various types of products, but also to increase the sense of dissatisfaction with one's own body (Grogan 1999, p. 115; Pope et al. 2000, p. 27; Kimmel 2015, pp. 449-451). In the case of women, modern standards of female beauty can lead to anorexia and bulimia, while the widespread model of muscular male body can result in men taking harmful anabolic steroids (Kimmel 2015, p. 451). Undoubtedly, the pressure exerted on men to conform to the current canon of beauty is greater than a few decades ago. I believe that Naomi Wolf's hypothesis, formulated in the early 1990s in the famous book *The Beauty Myth*, that being the epitome of beauty is a necessity for women, but not for men, for whom naturalness is a requirement (Woolf 2014), to a large extent ceased to be valid. I agree with Lynne Luciano, who writes: “The traditional image of women as sexual objects has simply been expanded: everyone has become an object to be seen” (Luciano 2002, p. 12).

Blurring gender differences through body

Juxtaposing the mesomorphic masculine body with a slim female body is not the only way to present gender images in contemporary Western culture. In advertising and other media texts one can find androgynous images of men and women which are part of the phenomenon of blurring gender differences. Gender binarism is deconstructed, among other things, by means of the body and attire. In advertisements, there are more and more people whose sex is hard to determine at first glance.

Discourse strategy associated with the use of androgynous images in the promotion of various products appeared in advertising in the 1980s, but the phenomenon of androgenisation of appearance had already appeared in the entertainment industry. Rock musicians (e.g. David Bowie) began to wear long hair, make-up and hippie style clothing typical for that period. On the other hand, some female singers experimented with hairstyle and clothing that made them similar to men (e.g. Annie Lennox) (Dzido 2003).

The next step in breaking the gender binary in advertising was the use of men of boyish, epebe-like appearance whose physiognomy and figure was very similar to that of women. Such images began to appear in the advertising of famous brands, for example, in the advertising campaigns of Calvin Klein, Kenzo, Jean-Paul Gaultier. The other side of the androgyny phenomenon are women with an ambivalent physiognomy, with very short hair or no hair on their head, dressed in trousers. These types of women appear in advertisements of cosmetics and unisex outfits, addressed to both men and women (Bordo 1999, pp. 191-193; Melosik 1996, pp. 230-231).

It is also worth noting that the world of fashion has already become accustomed with very slender men with the ectomorph body type and ambivalent physiognomy. One of the best-known androgynous models was Andrej Pejić at the beginning of the present decade, who participated in Calvin Klein's advertising campaigns and also appeared on the covers of such magazines as "Elle" or "Vogue".

It is difficult to unambiguously assess the emergence of androgenic images of men and women in advertising and other media messages. This phenomenon could be interpreted in the context of the inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2015, pp. 431-444). In a certain number of cases, an androgynous image can be combined with a non-normative gender identity of the person. However, in many cases, the deconstruction of gender stereotypes is a marketing procedure designed to arouse media interest in the person (the latter observation applies mainly to singers and musicians). The growing number of androgynous images of men in advertising is sometimes seen as a manifestation of deconstructing traditional masculinity. However, in most advertisements, this is a purely commercial procedure. Jacek Kochanowski, referring to the thoughts of Baudrillard and Bauman concerning the consumer society, rightly notes that "market

mechanisms are besetting the body today, supporting the normative system where it is profitable, and helping to cross the norm boundaries where new revenues may appear.” (Kochanowski 2013, p. 72)

Another phenomenon that is worth paying attention to is metrosexuality. In the mid-1990s Mark Simpson used the term *a metrosexual man*. According to the author of *Sex Terror* the term “metrosexual” describes “a new kind of male: a single young man living in the metropolis (because that’s where all the best shops are) who may be gay or may be straight, but it’s immaterial since he openly takes himself as his own love object” (Simpson 2002, p. 143). The definition formulated by the British author has been subjected to various reinterpretations. Today, the boundaries of metrosexuality are not clearly defined: as a rule, this concept refers to men who attach great importance to their appearance, body and clothes, but it also includes men who are sensitive, emphatic, which does not fit Simpson’s definition. Most often metrosexual men appear in the advertising of cosmetics and clothing. This kind of advertising makes use of professional models but also of well-known actors and athletes whom the creators of advertising campaigns recognize as particularly desired for the promotion of new products.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st century it was David Beckham, a man with a wife and children, not single, who became the icon of metrosexuality. The English football player and celebrity repeatedly changed hairstyles, experimented with nail polish, wore unisex clothes, often in pastel colours. To describe Beckham-like men who care about their appearance using different types of beauty products, the term *genderless sexy* was coined (Louis 2004, pp. 28-29). The sociologist Diana Barthel believes that advertising has played a significant role in the “feminization of culture” since men, as consumers, become like women, the objects of manipulation and subordination (Barthel 1992, p. 148). Men are increasingly turning to cosmetics, epilators⁶ and dietary supplements, which is certainly owed to advertising.

At the beginning of the present century, a new phenomenon emerged which Simpson described as *sporno*. It consists in including male sports stars in advertising and is characterised by a high dose of eroticism that sometimes borders with pornography. Famous athletes (e.g. Cristiano Ronaldo, Rafael Nadal) were involved in advertising men’s underwear, sports products and cosmetics. One of the first manifestations of *sporno* was the “stripped” calendar *Gods of the Stadium*, issued in 2001, with the French rugby team (cf. Olekser 2015). The *sporno* trend present in contemporary advertisement has made the male body, like the female body, an object that can be put

⁶ Depilated models (with removed hair from the torso, abdomen and legs) began to appear in advertisements on a larger scale at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Soon, various types of depilatory products addressed to men started to be promoted in commercials. Depilating male hair is an interesting issue but, due to the limited scope of the article, will not be developed.

on display to be watched. It should be emphasized, however, that the advertisements most often include athletes of the mesomorph body type, often accompanied by slim or very slim models. Thus, it can be concluded that images of spornosexual men serve to strengthen gender differences rather than to blur them.

Final thoughts

Modern culture is a culture of beauty, health, but, above all, consumption. Beautiful models of both sexes serve well to advance capitalism, but the way they are presented can have a negative impact on our mental health. Media texts, and especially advertising, contribute significantly to the fact that both women and men are dissatisfied with their and their partners' bodies. Developed capitalism first causes suffering and then provides various remedies to it, offering different kinds of products (see James 1997, pp. 2-3).

It would be hard not to agree with Foucault that it is difficult to indicate one source of knowledge/power in the context of the contemporary body. Nevertheless, one can risk a thesis that the greatest power over the body today is in the hands of large companies (pharmaceutical, cosmetic, clothing and sports equipment). The traditional image of a woman as an object for viewing was complemented by images of idealized male bodies. However, as Connell rightly points out, it is mainly men who use the body as a "machine" that produces gender differences. Often, in doing so, they defend the existing gender order (Connell 2013, p. 96).

In contemporary Western culture, and especially in advertising, we can see two contradictory, though unbalanced tendencies: on the one hand, a tendency to over-emphasise traditional looks of bodies (a well-muscled, mesomorphic body of men and a slim figure of women), and on the other hand, a reverse tendency related to the blurring of gender distinctions (e.g. androgynous images, metrosexuality). The countries belonging to the Western culture have seen many significant changes in the relations between women and men which contribute to the deconstruction of patriarchy. The proliferation of ways of forming male and female bodies, however, does not mean the complete erasure of the differences in the appearance of women and men. On the contrary, the body in advertising is still the main tool for creating these differences.

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SUMMARY: The main purpose of the article is to characterize discourse strategies pertaining to the presentation of the male and female body in modern advertising and to describe how the images of body contribute to the creation or blurring of gender differences. In order to better represent the phenomena that have appeared or intensified in recent decades, theoretical considerations concerning gender and body were presented. The main theoretical framework is Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, the article also makes use of other theoretical concepts relevant in the context (e.g. the theories of Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard or Erving Goffman). The modern culture of the west, and especially advertising is characterised by two opposite, though non-equivalent trends: on the one hand, there are bodies gendered in the traditional way (male mesomorph body type and a slender female body). On the other hand, the opposite trend is associated with blurring gender differences (e.g. androgynous images). The proliferation of ways of forming male and female bodies, however, does not mean the complete erasure of the differences between the appearance of women and men. On the contrary, the body in advertising is still the main tool for creating these differences.

KEYWORDS: female body, male body, femininity, masculinity, gender differences, advertising.

PLEĆ I CIAŁO. RZECZ O TWORZENIU I ZACIERANIU RÓŻNIC GENDEROWYCH W KULTURZE NA PRZYKŁADZIE REKLAMY

STRESZCZENIE: Głównym celem artykułu jest scharakteryzowanie strategii dyskursywnych dotyczących przedstawiania ciała męskiego i kobiecego we współczesnych reklamach komercyjnych oraz opisanie, w jaki sposób obrazy ciała pojawiające się w reklamie przyczyniają się do tworzenia bądź zacierania różnic genderowych. W celu lepszego zobrazowania zjawisk, które pojawiły się lub nasiliły w ostatnich dekadach, zostały zaprezentowane rozważania teoretyczne dotyczące płci kulturowej i ciała. Podstawowe ramy teoretyczne stanowi koncepcja męskości hegemonicznej Raewyn Connell, ale w artykule zostały wykorzystane również inne użyteczne w kontekście podjętej problematyki koncepcje teoretyczne (np. poglądy Michela Foucaulta, Jeana Baudrillarda czy Ervinga Goffmana).

We współczesnej kulturze Zachodu, a szczególnie w przekazach reklamowych, możemy dostrzec dwie sprzeczne, choć nierównoważne tendencje: z jednej strony mamy do czynienia z upłciwionymi w sposób tradycyjny ciałami (męskie ciało mezomorficzne oraz szczupłe ciało kobiece), a z drugiej tendencją odwrotną, związaną z zacieraniem dystynkcji genderowych (np. wizerunki androgyniczne). Proliferacja sposobów kształtowania ciała męskiego i kobiecego nie oznacza jednak całkowitego zatarcia różnic pomiędzy wyglądem kobiet i mężczyzn, wprost przeciwnie – ciało w reklamie nadal pozostaje głównie narzędziem tworzenia tych różnic.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: ciało kobiece, ciało męskie, kobiecość, męskość, różnice genderowe, reklama.