The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media

Edited by

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The ‘knowing wink’ is a rhetorical strategy by which an advertisement draws attention to itself as a construction. It enables characters to visually address the audience, to step outside the narrative and join with the viewer in a wryly speculative commentary on what we have seen (Goldman and Papson, 1991). In advertisements that recirculate old gender stereotypes, the knowing wink meshes easily with a postfeminist attitude, in that its strategy is to adopt a tone of ‘we know that we are all equal now, and that we are not sexist anymore, and we can now all laugh at these old stereotypes.’ The big question, and one that the research presented in this chapter seeks to address, is whether advertisements utilizing the knowing wink are subverting stereotypes or allowing them to be rearticulated and recuperated. This is an issue I explored in meetings with young New Zealand men and women to discuss two television commercials that use ‘knowing winks’ about purportedly ‘updated’ versions of the ‘Kiwi bloke,’ widely regarded as the hegemonic masculinity in New Zealand.

The chapter is based on my PhD research, in which over several years in the late 1990s and early 2000s I talked with focus groups of young people aged 16 to 18 from a range of New Zealand secondary schools to explore their responses to gender and race in advertising. Focus groups have a long history in the social science field and can yield rich data as the nature of group dynamics and the potential for interviewees to respond in agreement and/or disagreement allow for nuanced discussions within the group (Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook, 2007). As a secondary school teacher at the time, I was able to gain access to other schools relatively easily. I chose schools from as wide a range as I could: public and private; single-sex male, single-sex female, and co-educational; city and country; and from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. I set up focus groups in these schools that met with me out of class. The participants were self-selected. In the first groups we
talked generally about race and gender in advertising, but as certain advertisements were mentioned by the participants I got copies of them and they were specifically discussed in subsequent groups. I transcribed all the interviews myself, and analyzed them according to the thematic patterns that arose.

The nature of the research changed direction twice. It became clear after several focus groups that I needed to narrow my topic, and so I cut it back to young women reading gender in advertising. This became, in effect, a study of postfeminism. In the latter part of my research the two commercials that are the subject of this chapter screened on television. At the same time I was given the chance to meet with a co-educational class (as opposed to focus groups) and I took the opportunity to focus on these commercials.

As a class is considerably larger than a focus group, I was concerned about whether people would be as open, and also how I would record the whole discussion. I devised a questionnaire that asked students to write down what they thought the advertisement was saying, what their response was to this, and why. I then divided the class into gendered groups, got feedback from those groups and led a general discussion, and finally asked students to complete the last section of the questionnaire, which required them to write down whether or not they had changed their opinions after the wider discussion, and why or why not. The questionnaire asked them to specify their age and gender, but was otherwise anonymous.

Despite my initial reservations, this methodology yielded valuable data. The written responses fell into much more defined gendered positions than the following discussion in class indicated. A possible reason for this might be that these participants moderated their views in a public forum so as not to appear antagonistic, or either too feminist or too macho. It might also be that they renegotiated their initial interpretation as other points of view were expressed. However, while some students used the space on the form to elaborate on their original reading or comment on other interpretations, nobody changed their basic initial position. This suggests that the first reason is more likely.

This methodology (and the two commercials themselves) produced such interesting results that I contacted two other co-educational schools and repeated the process. I call this my 2000 research. Then, in March 2010, I met with two classes from one of the state co-educational schools I had worked with 10 years earlier in the hope that doing so might provide some indication of the extent to which these advertisements, aimed at a particular sociohistoric moment, would now be seen as irrelevant, and to explore similarities with and differences from my earlier findings.

In the rest of this chapter, I briefly discuss postfeminism and hegemonic masculinity as they relate to this research, outline the ‘knowing wink,’ and discuss Brenda Cooper’s use of the concept of ‘relevancy’ in her work with gendered readings. After describing the two television commercials that are the basis of this chapter, I move on to set out and discuss some of the readings of these advertisements by my participants. I arrange these readings by gender to better demonstrate the extent to which gender determines readings. Finally, I consider what these responses
might tell us about postfeminism in this particular demographic of young women at this particular time in New Zealand.

**Postfeminism**

Postfeminism should be seen as a cluster of different tendencies. Sarah Projansky (2001) and Rosalind Gill (2007b), for example, set out different ways in which postfeminism has been conceptualized. Gill identifies ‘the three key ways in which postfeminism has been understood: as an epistemological shift, as a historical transformation and as a backlash against feminism’ (Gill, 2007b, p. 249) before outlining a new way of conceptualizing postfeminism – as a sensibility. Sarah Projansky outlines five interrelated categories of postfeminism: linear, backlash, equality and choice, (hetero)sex-positive, and male postfeminism.

When Gill speaks of a postfeminist sensibility, she is referring to ‘recurring and relatively stable themes, tropes and constructions that characterize gender representations in the media in the early twenty-first century’ (2007b, p. 255). Projansky, on the other hand, teases out differences in the forms of postfeminism subscribed to by individual subjects. There are of course overlaps here: the one most relevant to this chapter is the close mesh between Gill’s trope of ‘a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment’ and Projansky’s category of ‘equality and choice’ postfeminism, which regards feminism as having given women ‘choice,’ and ‘success’ in achieving gender ‘equity,’ so women no longer need feminism. Projansky describes this category as young and implicitly heterosexist, in that ‘having it all’ means career and family, and argues that it is a very middle-class phenomenon.

The absolute assumption of equality and choice is certainly the position most of my female, predominantly white middle-class, participants in the 2000 study started from, and they continually reminded me of this (Abel, 2005). Of the more than 140 young women who took part, only one identified herself as ‘feminist, I guess.’ However, my data shows that, while many of these young women spoke postfeminism when talking specifically about their lives, their experiences, and their expectations of the future, their ‘feminist’ responses to the representation of women in many advertisements point to contradictions and ambivalence.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first put forward by R.W. Connell in 1987. While the concept has been contested, Connell and Messerschmidt have argued that two fundamental features remain after 20 years of research: the combination of a plurality of masculinities and a hierarchy of masculinities. Within this plurality, ‘certain masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846). The version of masculinity that several scholars name as hegemonic in New Zealand,
that of ‘the Kiwi bloke’ (Campbell, Law, and Honeyfield, 1999; Bannister, 2005),
is not one that holds economic or political power. This is in line with Connell’s
argument that the most visible bearers of (masculine) hegemony may not be
(politically) powerful in themselves (Connell, 1995, pp. 76–81). This would seem
to be precisely what Richard Collier is referring to when he suggests that what is
actually being discussed in many accounts of hegemonic masculinity is ‘a range of
popular ideologies of what constitute ideal or actual characteristics of “being a
man”’ (Collier, 1998, p. 21). As Campbell, Law, and Honeyfield point out,

The Kiwi bloke remains the most visible representation of New Zealand masculinity.
In cartoon, film, television and literature he performs the strange magic of rendering
invisible the variety of ways in which masculinity is constituted, contested and co-
opted by both men and women in New Zealand. (Campbell, Law, and Honeyfield,
1999, p. 15)

While variants abound, the image of the Kiwi bloke centers on an ethos of mascu-
linity based on ‘mateship’—the male camaraderie of pioneers united by common
physical struggle against the elements, in war or sport, all cemented in the pub.
A corollary of this is the subordinate role women have traditionally played in a Kiwi
bloke’s life.

But, with the rise of a more cosmopolitan and sophisticated lifestyle for the
middle classes, other masculinities have arisen. Phillips (1996) and others argued in
the late 1990s that the days of the Kiwi bloke were numbered. Nevertheless, in a
2004 study by advertising agency FCB, researchers noted the continuing ‘blokiness’
of Kiwi culture (Bannister, 2005). But strong challenges to the dominance of the
Kiwi bloke have been mounted by the increased prominence of women in public
life. A range of advertisers in New Zealand have negotiated this situation by
producing television commercials that focus on gender roles in a knowing, tongue-
in-cheek way, which has allowed them to play with gender stereotypes that are still
emotionally potent but no longer acceptable in their pure form. The ‘knowing
wink’ used here is potentially hegemonic in that, while on the surface it purports
to be ironic, it can also be seen as opening up a space for the return of the traditional
Kiwi bloke.

Relevancy

Fiske’s theory of relevancy provides a useful approach in understanding the gen-
dered nature of so many of the readings of the two advertisements (Fiske, 1988).
Relevancy starts from the position that the established paradigm of dominant,
negotiated, and oppositional meanings does not in itself fully explain the relation-
ship between the spectator and the text. Fiske explains relevancy in terms of the
metaphor of text-as-menu—viewers select the meanings that are relevant to their
social allegiances. A body of research following Fiske indicated that members of
marginalized groups tend to see oppression as highly relevant when interpreting media texts, while members of non-marginalized groups do not find oppression relevant or, indeed, do not even notice it (Cohen, 1991, on gay and heterosexual audiences; Cooper, 1998, on black and white audiences; and Cooper, 1999, on male and female audiences). Of particular significance to this study is Brenda Cooper’s use of relevancy as a tool to understand the generally contradictory interpretations of the film *Thelma and Louise* by male and female viewers:

> while the majority of women overwhelmingly interpreted events in the movie as evidence of women’s lack of power and lack of respect in a patriarchal society, most men spectators failed to make this connection. For most women, the events in the film are a result of sexist attitudes towards women represented in the male characters’ roles and illustrate women’s marginalized status and struggle to transcend that secondary position. But most male spectators did not make this connection between the movie’s plot and overall gender-based societal issues. In their responses, they trivialized the very issues of sexism that women spectators saw as most relevant. (1999, p. 29)

### The Advertisements

The two television commercials that are the subject of this chapter deal with the construction of masculinity and femininity using the ironic exaggeration of gender stereotypes as a source of humor. One advertisement was for a line of men’s clothing, Hallensteins, which was trying to reposition itself as attractive to a younger market with a campaign using the tag-line ‘It’s good to be a guy.’ The advertisement opens with a long shot of three young men in their twenties standing around a barbecue in a backyard dressed casually, presumably in Hallensteins clothes, and holding beer cans. The shot is held for 22 seconds (a very long time in a 30-second television commercial) and throughout this time the men are silent, staring steadfastly at the barbecue. The advertisement eventually cuts to a shot of a kitchen. Three young women bustle around making salads, talking at the tops of their voices, cutting over each other all the time. The sound level is high, as is the activity level. The caption ‘It’s good to be a guy’ comes on screen.

The second advertisement was for Vodafone, a brand of mobile phone. It opens with a young man lounging on a sofa watching television. The television soundtrack suggests he is watching sport (of course). He wears the standard checked shirt of the Kiwi bloke over a T-shirt and jeans, his hair is longish and unkempt, and he is generally a bit scruffy. A phone rings and he calls out ‘Can you get it?’ We cut to an attractive dark-haired young woman in another room looking at herself in the mirror with a hairbrush in her hand. She is neatly and attractively dressed and wearing high heels. She stomps unwillingly out of her room, passes in front of the sofa, and picks up the phone (which is very close to the young man). He whips a mobile phone out from under a cushion and says into it ‘While you’re there, can you change the channel?’
I talked with the advertising creatives responsible for both advertisements. Mikhail German from Publicis Mojo told me that when putting together the Hallensteins campaign the agency did a considerable amount of research about masculinity with groups. Because women make up such a large proportion of Hallensteins’ customers, 50 percent of those whose views were sought were women. German said that there was a general feeling that there needed to be a return from the ‘SNAG’ (sensitive New Age guy) to the more traditional New Zealand male, but in an updated version. The masculinity in the Hallensteins advertisements was, then, a return to the ‘guy,’ but ‘in a way that did not put people down’ (2003, November 6, personal communication).

Carl Fleet, also from Publicis Mojo, sought a similar sort of masculinity for the Vodafone advertisement. He described the male character as ‘a bit of a lad’ who had found himself living with a beautiful and successful young woman in her very nice apartment. Unable to believe his luck, he ‘tries it on’ by asking his girlfriend to change the channel for him, just to see if this will work. Fleet said that he deliberately chose not to have the young woman as blonde, because this would have changed the dynamics of the advertisement, and that the final shot, where she turns and glares at the young man, indicated that she was not going to put up with demands like this. He saw her as the dominant party in the relationship (2003, June 23, personal communication).

But, while there was no intent on the part of the ‘authors’ of these texts to encode a patriarchal ideology, a wide variety of interpretations emerged in the decoding process. Some females saw the advertisements as constructing and encouraging male dominance in the private sphere. Some males saw the advertisements as confirming a version of masculinity that they themselves identified with. Others read the advertisement as the knowing wink that was intended.

Reading the Advertisements

REBECCA: In both ads the males are shown to be completely simple, and on the other hand the females are shown to be complete – one is lazy and the other is active. The male is supposed to be dominant in these ads but in both cases the females are shown to be superior in different ways.

MALCOLM: We sort of agreed that guys get it pretty easy. The ad said ‘It’s good to be a guy’ and we agreed it pretty much is, and the women are always in hysteria and fiddling around doing makeup and … yeah.

Rebecca and Malcolm were reporting back from discussions among female students and male students respectively. Rebecca’s report shows that, despite the intentions of German and Fleet, these young women interpret the advertisements as being about male dominance. At the same time, they read against the grain of what they perceived to be the ‘preferred meaning’ of the advertisements, to see them as providing proof of female superiority. Malcolm’s report is similar to many
of the male readings of this advertisement in that it does not allude to issues of power. The descriptor ‘hysterical’ was one that many of the male participants used in reference to the Hallensteins advertisement – they saw the women as not merely active but hyper-active. Young men in other schools also saw the advertisement as showing how frenetic and gossipy women are, while men are content to be together as mates and do not feel any need to continually talk. A process of reporting back like this does not show variations and nuances of readings within each group, but generally whenever I showed participants these advertisements young women would identify with the female characters and ‘female’ characteristics. The divisions among them had to do with how seriously to take these scenarios. Young men were more divided in their allegiances, with a few utilizing a feminist discourse, many identifying with the exaggerated stereotypes of the Kiwi bloke, and others adopting positions in between.

Vodafone: Male readings

Male readings of the Vodafone advertisement also covered a wide spectrum, but three tendencies could be identified: readings that took what might be called a ‘feminist’ position, those that clearly favored the male character, and those that indicated that the advertisement was not meant to be taken seriously. I discuss below the first two tendencies.

Ben’s is an example of a ‘feminist’ reading:

He’s a laid back slob who forces his control on women to do things he can’t be bothered doing. He is portrayed as masculine and powerful.

[Later written response after class discussion] Creates a showy [sic] feeling which creates an impact on society. Society mimics the behaviour shown in the ad.

Via the use of vocabulary such as ‘portrayed’ and ‘creates,’ Ben seems to distinguish between males in real life and the world that the advertisement portrays. He does not appear to have been swayed by those of his classmates who argued in general discussion that the advertisement was not meant to be taken seriously. Instead, his position hardened and he ascribed what theorists call ‘hypodermic’ powers to the advertisement.

Male expressions of concern about the Vodafone advertisement were, however, in the minority. Trevor’s comment was typical of those who applauded the male character’s tactics: ‘The guy is lazy but also smart and clever at getting the woman to do as he wants.’ Others called the guy ‘witty’ or ‘crafty,’ and Sean took this sentiment further by describing the character’s behavior as ‘good Kiwi ingenuity.’ These readings are ambiguous in that they do not necessarily imply a situation where men dominate women. Perhaps a male flatmate could have been substituted for the female character, and their comments would have been the same. Nonetheless, the fact that the men did not read gender politics as part of the content of the advertisement makes a strikingly contrast with the responses of
female viewers, and echoes Cooper’s male viewers discussed above (Cooper, 1999) in terms of the concept of ‘relevance.’

Other male viewers strongly supported the male character. Two, for example, used a popular colloquial phrase in their written comments:

That guy was THE MAN! Because he got his woman to change the channel for him and he didn’t have to get up.

That guy is the man. It shows New Zealand women as kinda stroppy.

These views strongly support traditional gender roles, but it is notable that these young men did not express these opinions in public. In other words, they had enough awareness of gender politics to know that such opinions would not be acceptable in a wider, co-ed group. Another common male response was to contrast the two genders:

It shows men are carefree and witty, not as pedantic and vain as women are.

It shows men as more laidback. Women always take ages getting ready because they insist on looking perfect.

Comments like these totally ignored the main narrative in favor of those elements of the advertisement that appeared to support their pre-existing ideas about men and women.

Vodafone: Female readings

Although Carl Fleet told me he created the Vodafone advertisement to show that at the end the woman was in control of the situation, none of the young women read the advertisement in this way. While some still thought the advertisement was funny, most young women expressed opinions ranging from mild concern through to worry that the advertisement might ‘influence more men to boss women around.’ Josie was one who expressed this concern:

Guys are lazy and think women should do everything for them. They are dominant over women. It almost makes the guy look smart for tricking the female into it.

[Later written response after class discussion]: I think maybe the guys who see this ad will think ‘Wow, cool, I want to be like that guy and have control over women.’

Female students identified other ways in which male dominance was encoded into the advertisement:

BRIDGET: the lady is dressed up nicely (takes pride in her appearance) but the man is untidy – a slob – like he’s superior so he doesn’t have to worry about looking nice.

Bridget’s reading is almost the opposite of that intended by Carl Fleet. Rather than reading the male character’s clothing style as an indication of his being ‘down
market,’ Bridget reads it as a sign of his superiority. She is probably reading syntagmatically here. Given that a sign gains its value from its relationship to other signs it is linked with, once the male character’s behavior is read as dominance it follows that other signs might be read in a way that supports this interpretation. Felicity’s comment is particularly interesting:

The thing that stands out for me is the girl’s willingness to answer the phone when it’s right next to him. It suggests we, as women, must be obedient. Also the lack of respect and motivation the guy has is lost because of the humor.

Rather than condemn or ridicule the girl for being so willing to answer the phone, Felicity locates the situation within the framework of a male dominance to which all women are expected to be subject. She also sees through the knowing wink, regarding it—as it has been described by some scholars—as a recuperative strategy. To her the joke is not funny, and masks what she clearly sees as inappropriate behavior.

Many female participants took exception to the stereotype of men ‘being macho and in control,’ while at the same time seeing it as irrelevant to their lives. When I asked a female group at a liberal co-ed school if they thought advertisements like this might encourage macho behavior, they were optimistic:

MAGGIE: No-one really pays any attention to it.

MAGGIE: But there are guys that are still like that though.

BETHANY: Maybe their dad treats their mum like that.

When Maggie says, ‘there are guys that are still like that though,’ her use of ‘still’ suggests she sees male dominance (or, more likely, male attempts to dominate) as an aspect of the past that is, for her generation, changing.

Hallensteins: Male readings

The Hallensteins advertisement explicitly encourages the viewer to compare male and female behavior. The majority of my male participants took up this opportunity, some with considerable relish. What was particularly notable was the similarity between readings, as these examples demonstrate:

ROB: Women are too fussy and like to be exact while men just chill out.

WAYNE: Men are carefree and not caught up in trivial pedantic matters as women are.

ROD: Guys are laid back and carefree, while women are unorganized, controlling, fussy, running the show.

There were repeated descriptions of the female characters as ‘too fussy,’ ‘too exact,’ or ‘wanting things to be perfect,’ for which I can personally find no evidence in the
advertisement’s narrative or characterization. If female viewers in my survey were particularly sensitive to images of women as ‘passive,’ male viewers seemed particularly sensitive to images of women as hyperactive (‘fussy,’ ‘rushing and worrying,’ ‘frantic,’ etc.). Particularly noteworthy is Rod’s choice of ‘controlling’ and ‘running the show’ to describe the women, despite the fact that there is no interaction between the two sexes in the advertisement.

What is one to make of this? It seems that these readers draw on their own sense of gender characteristics, whether this is gained from lived experience or from cultural stereotypes, and map these onto the characters in the advertisement. Words such as ‘pedantic,’ ‘annoying,’ and ‘controlling’ indicate a sense of masculine resentment against ‘demands’ that women make. This was also evident in the description of the female character in the Vodafone advertisement as ‘kinda stroppy.’

I am reminded of Cohen’s account of ‘how spectators selectively draw from the text and their identities at different moments of interpretation’ (1991, p. 453).

As with the Vodafone advertisement, there were a few male readings that criticized the male characters or read the advertisement in terms of power relations. Tom, who described the Vodafone advertisement as ‘shovonistic,’ was the only male participant to recognize the politics of gendered space and labor:

It conveys the idea that a man’s place is outside and a woman’s is in the kitchen.

Hallensteins: Female readings

What the young women found relevant in the advertisement was very different. While only Tom commented on the ‘women in the kitchen’ stereotype, a substantial number of young women did. However, they came at this differently.

BRIDGET: It’s very stereotypical, as if the woman’s place is in the kitchen. The men are shown as dim – just standing there with a menial task like in the days of the caveman.

SELENA: The women belong in the kitchen – this is not true in my point of view so this ad is not correct. This ad says that women must do everything while guys remain laid back. Men will now expect women to do everything for them.

LOTTY: This is a typical women in the kitchen, men outdoors image. The ad says ‘It’s good to be a guy’ but this comment is probably coming from a guy because I think women would say ‘It’s good to be a woman,’ organizing and rushing around because this is what we enjoy and are good at.

Bridget and Selena reject this patriarchal ideology vehemently, with Selena adding to the number who see advertisements as having direct effects on people’s behavior. Lotty’s reclaiming of the activity of domestic management (‘organizing and rushing around’) as a female pleasure was echoed by Heather:

The first thing I thought was ‘It’s so true’ as my parents and other people I know it’s exactly the same. Females making salads and ‘gossiping’ in the kitchen, males cooking
meat, maybe a word or two about rugby. It seems typical. Makes me proud to be a
girl, I like being classified into that group.

[Later written response after general discussion] There was some argument about a
negative portrayal towards the opposite sex, but I think that girls would like to be the
‘gossip queens’ in the kitchen and will think it’s bad and awkward not to be talking,
and guys would like to be outside and feel more comfortable not having to converse.

Heather’s use of ‘scare quotes’ around the terms ‘gossiping’ and ‘gossip queens’
suggests she is aware of a (usually male) rejection of female conversation as ‘mere
gossip,’ and can be read as a reclaiming of the term. Her response also supports the
large body of literature that argues that women tend to describe themselves in terms
of relationships and fulfill their interpersonal needs primarily through relationships
with other women, while men are more autonomous and self-contained. Heather
naturalizes these gender differences, as well as the gendered division of labor, and
sees them as ‘different but equal.’ While she probably does not realize it, her attitude
also validates women’s domestic labor. Myra MacDonald, writing about the
representation of femininity in advertising, points out that housework has been
downgraded both by the dominant ideology and by a misreading of feminism. She
argues that the idea that housework has played a role in sustaining women’s
oppression ‘is not incompatible with recognizing the possibility of pleasure in
domestic activity when it is consciously chosen by women rather than structurally
enforced’ (1995, p. 96). Advertising has played a role in this structural enforcement,
and it is only in very recent years that men have been shown as naturally engaged
in domestic labor, rather than helping out. Many of the young women in this study
were very aware, and resentful, of this division of labor in advertising. Heather and
Lotty go against this trend by seeing managing domestic work as important and
enjoyable. Presumably for them it is not structurally enforced.

Overall, many of these young people appeared to be using the advertisement to
affirm their gendered identity. This was most obvious with the males, but Lotty
and Heather also used the advertisement to affirm their sense of identity (‘It makes
me proud to be a girl’ and ‘It’s good to be a woman’).

**Summary of 2000 Research**

These discussions reveal the predominance of gendered readings. Young women
tended to read both advertisements in the context of the historical subordination
of women in the home. While some enjoyed the humor and dismissed the adver-
tisements as ‘not meant to be taken seriously,’ the majority were more cautious.
A minority saw the advertisements as having the potential to have a negative impact
on power relations between males and females. There were concerns that male
dominance in the private sphere may be clawed back again.

Maggie, responding to the Vodafone advertisement, suggested that ‘there are guys
that are still like that though.’ Many of the male responses to these advertisements
did indeed suggest that ‘there are guys that are still like that.’ While a small minority utilized a ‘feminist’ discourse, the majority were either unaware of gender politics or sympathetic to what they read as the show of male superiority. What stood out in the written comments was some strong identification with exaggerated male behavior. A considerable number of male participants (again only under cover of anonymity) compared female characters (or women) negatively to male characters (or men). This was not a strategy used by any of the female participants, either in writing or conversation. A potential exception was Heather, who saw what she appeared to consider natural differences between the genders to be an example of ‘different but equal.’ This pattern supports the theory that men affirm their heterosexual masculinity by differentiating themselves from women (and from gay men).

In terms of the knowing wink, while many recognized the ironic humor, others, almost all young women, did take the advertisement seriously. Several saw the advertisements as having the potential to legitimize male dominance in the private sphere. For some young men, what was meant to be an exaggeration of gendered behavior seemed to reinforce their sense of masculinity – they admired and identified with the exaggeration. While the advertising agency involved intended to imply a masculinity that did not put women down, several of the male participants constructed their own interpretation of masculinity in the advertisement that effectively did just that.

West and Zimmerman point out that ‘if, in doing gender, men are also doing dominance and women are doing difference, the resultant social order, which supposedly reflects “natural differences,” is a powerful reinforcer and legitimator of hierarchical arrangement’ (1987, p. 146). This gives a useful starting point from which to examine how these advertisements work for different audiences. The Hallensteins advertisement was constructed to show the young men ‘doing difference,’ differentiating them from both females and previous versions of masculinity. The Vodafone advertisement, on the other hand, establishes the male with his scruffy appearance and sprawling body language as the main character, so that the young woman who is devoting time and absolute attention to the minutiae of beauty activities in front of a mirror is to be seen as ‘doing difference.’ The question is whether either of these two are ‘doing dominance.’ Certainly the advertising agency’s intention here was that the young man was (unsuccessfully) ‘trying dominance.’ Yet, as we saw, one female viewer read the young man’s lack of attention to his appearance as a sign of his ‘superiority.’

In this earlier research I found that most of the young women I met believed that they had (and would continue to have) chances that were at least equal to those of their male peers. They were also living in a historical period in which they were succeeding better than previous generations of women in the world that they were currently immersed in – school (Abel, 2005, p. 265). Yet they seemed to derive excessive pleasure from advertisements that showed women in control or turning the tables on men. These young women were situated in a particular sociohistorical time that saw the rhetoric of ‘girls can do anything’ firmly embedded in New Zealand culture (if not so consistently in social practice). In principle these
young women claimed total equality, and some of them were very emphatic about it. Yet, as I wrote then:

there is a sense in which many of them are ‘on guard’ still, quick to protest at any potential infringement of this equality. [...] It may very well be that young women in 2010 will read ads like this differently – if, of course, such ads are still being produced. (Abel, 2005, p. 266)

10 Years Later

In March 2010 I returned to one of the Auckland secondary schools I had previously visited and discussed these same advertisements with two senior co-ed classes. I found that, while the gender divide in terms of how these advertisements were read was as strong as ever, the nature of the responses was different. The overwhelming agreement among the young men was that the advertisements were funny. The key reason for this was the use of stereotypes:

These are stereotypes. The ads are funny because they are using stereotypes.

The ad is funny because the man is such a stereotype and we understand it entirely instantly.

Many young men went further to name what they saw as sexism in the advertisements, but did not take this seriously. Nobody used the term ‘ironic,’ but it seemed to underlie these responses:

It’s funny to see the sexist stereotypes at the end.

Sexism is always funny.

This ad is funny because of its blatant display of sexism.

While on paper these comments look ambiguous and can be read as supporting sexism, in the context of the discussions in class I read them as a comment on what the participants saw as outdated practices. Sexism is in the past, and to see it in practice is funny. I am reminded here of Rosalind Gill’s argument about ‘lads’ mags’: ‘irony also functions through the very extremeness of the sexism expressed [...] [which is] evidence that there is no sexism.’ (2007a, p. 267)

A more articulate young man wrote: ‘[The Hallensteins advertisement] could justifiably be taken as offensive. I myself don’t take personal offence, but I can see how it could cause a stir. I would still call it a parody of perceived gender issues.’ He was the only male participant to think that there might be wider issues involved in the content of the advertisements. Several acknowledged elements of ‘truth’ in the advertisements, but this did not detract from the humor: ‘It was kind of true and funny.’ Several others took this ‘truth’ a bit further and commented on the ‘New Zealandness’ of the Hallensteins advertisement.
With a few exceptions, the young women’s responses split into those who actively disliked the advertisements and those who either thought they were funny because they contained elements of reality or were resigned to the reality they saw in them. Sexism for many of these young women was a serious matter:

I can look at it and laugh because I realise that its [sic] just an ad, but I do not support the sexism that comes through.

It pisses me off! The people who designed it seem to think that sexism is really HILARIOUS! [capital letters in the original response]

I don’t like it. It uses sexism and stereotypes to say that men can be lazy and dumb because bitches will do everything for them. [Underlining in the original response]

Behind these statements is the same concern expressed by some of my female participants in the 2000 research – that such portrayals of masculinity and gender roles might endorse and encourage the ‘return’ of such attitudes. But, whereas at the turn of the century outright anger was rare, in 2010, at least with these participants, the anger was evident. It continued in other comments:

If it wasn’t for women fussing around, guys wouldn’t have the carefree laidback life they have. Nowadays, I’d shove the men into the kitchen just to know how it feels like.

Others did think the advertisements were funny, but this was because of the elements of reality that they contained.

[On the Vodafone advertisement] It’s horrible but true. It’s a little over exaggerated but that’s how men treat women. Since its true you understand the fact that it’s a bit humourous.

I think it’s funny. People claim it’s sexist but its just reality.

Discussion

Michael Kimmel makes the point that being a man means ‘not being like a woman’ (2004, p. 185). This attitude came through strongly in the 2000 research, where young males ascribed to the female characters what they saw as negative characteristics that were not actually obvious in the advertisements. It was still present, though not as strongly, in 2010, where the male characters were admired for being ‘chilled out.’ The young women, on the other hand, interpreted being ‘chilled out’ as being ‘lazy.’

In the earlier research, the confidence with which the female participants described what they saw as female characteristics, and the scorn (and sometimes wonderment) with which they regarded the construction of masculinity in the advertisements – a
masculinity that was on the whole embraced by the young men – suggested a
securer sense of oneself as a person than I remember among the young women I
knew when I was their age. None of their peers 10 years later expressed the same
confidence. I would have liked to follow up this exercise with female-only focus
groups to examine these attitudes more, but did not have the opportunity.

In 2000 the responses of young men ranged from a feminist consciousness to
‘machoism’ from some young men who admired the behavior of the male charac-
ters. It could be argued that the ‘knowing wink’ employed in the advertisements
allowed such identification, but further discussions with these participants was
needed to really establish this. Some young women enjoyed the humor that the
knowing wink provided, arguing that the advertisements were not meant to be
taken seriously. The majority, however, were more cautious and appeared to ignore
any suggestion of irony in their readings. A minority saw the advertisements as
having the potential to have a negative impact on power relations between males
and females. There was a strong concern that male dominance in the private sphere
may be clawed back again.

By 2010, however, more than half of the young women did not think the adver-
tisements were funny, brushed away the irony, and disliked the use of sexism, and
many were very angry. Others negated the ‘knowing wink’ by suggesting that in
fact the advertisements reflected a reality they were familiar with. Young men were
more unified in their response than in 2000, with a general agreement that the
portrayal of sexism in the advertisements was funny. This recognition and naming
of sexism was a clear departure from the earlier responses. In 2000 I was told over
and over again that ‘our generation isn’t sexist.’ Indeed, in the numerous responses
to the two advertisements that are the subject of this chapter, only once did anyone
use the term ‘sexist.’ Yet, 10 years later, this was the most commonly used descrip-
tor of the advertisements – if perceived completely differently by the young men
and young women. None of the young men seemed to consider the ‘sexism’ being
enacted as ‘normal’ or desirable – it was behavior that they relegated to the past.
Young women’s responses, on the other hand, indicated either through anger or
through acceptance that gender roles such as those shown in the advertisements
were indeed still alive. They seemed aware of the power relations involved here.
While the young men might have recognized sexism in the advertisements, this was
not considered in terms of current power relations. Overall, it seemed as if there
was a gender gap in what was seen as ‘reality.’

How, then, are we to understand these findings, and what do they tell us about
postfeminism as the twenty-first century unfolds? They could be read as concurring
with the international research discussed above, which shows that dominant groups
do not notice issues of power in media texts while non-dominant groups do. Yet to
what extent can one now talk of young white middle-class women as being members
of a subordinate group? A complicating factor here is that most of the young
women did not see themselves as members of a group with less power – nevertheless,
they were particularly attuned to gender politics in a way that totally passed by
most of the young men.
So, something is going on here. In 2005 I wrote about my female participants from my earlier study:

For all the talk of ‘this generation’ not being sexist, and even of girls having more choices available to them than boys, there often seemed to be a sense of the fragility of the equality gained. There were hints of concern – in some of the responses to the lads ads, and in explanations that young women were sensitive about negative images because of the past history of media representations – that the gains made might be clawed back again.

In 2010 those concerns seem to be stronger. I noted earlier that Gill identifies what she sees as ‘the three key ways in which postfeminism has been understood: as an epistemological shift, as a historical transformation and as a backlash against feminism’ (2007b, p. 249) before outlining a new way of conceptualizing postfeminism – as a sensibility. I do not see these as four separate ways of being or thinking. Leaving aside the backlash against feminism, which seemed absolutely irrelevant to my female participants, my 2000 data showed that they were aware of both an epistemological shift in ways of thinking about their role in the world and a historical transformation in experiencing this in terms of gendered power relations. There was a collective sense, expressed on many occasions, of ‘our generation,’ which ‘did not think that way’ (Abel, 2005, p. 102). These two factors both resulted in, and were the result of, a postfeminist sensibility seen in their unrelenting optimism, fuelled by an absolute assumption of equality and choice. Nevertheless, there were still a considerable number of young women who were cautious about these advertisements, expressing concerns that they might encourage men to return to previous forms of gendered relations. It seemed to me at the time that my participants were in a transitional historical period, where postfeminism had a strong hold but was still not totally embedded.8

The change in attitudes between the 2000 and the 2010 research suggests that, while postfeminism may still be understood as an epistemological shift, a historical transformation in the ways in which young women of this demographic experience gender roles has not continued apace. As noted, the responses from the young women in 2010 split into those who actively disliked the advertisements and those who either thought they were funny because they contained elements of reality or were resigned to the reality they saw in them.

Where then does this put postfeminism? I was not able to spend enough time with the young women in 2010 to get any sense of their attitudes towards their future lives and the opportunities they thought they would have. However, their responses to the representation of gender roles in these television advertisements, and the greater difference between the male and female readings of the advertisements, strongly suggest that their experiences with their male peers have not been as equal as they would have liked – that a postfeminist sensibility has come up against a wall that they did not expect, and do not like.
Notes

1 The wider research project involved 36 groups in 11 schools.

2 A flaw in my methodology is that I did not ask students to identify their ethnicity, and am unable to consider this as a possible factor in students responses. It is impossible to ask students to identify their class, especially in New Zealand, which holds strongly to a myth of egalitarianism. Nevertheless, in my wider project when I visited 10 different schools in different neighborhoods I was able to make conjectures along these lines.

3 For example, in the period from the late 1990s through the early 2000s, New Zealand had a female prime minister and chief justice, and for some of this time a female leader of the opposition and a female governor general. However, as these women finished their terms of office or were defeated at elections, they were mainly replaced by white middle-class men.

4 This is not to suggest that the inscription of a patriarchal ideology is always intentional (and of course the power of ideology is precisely strongest when it is unconscious), but, in the case of a knowing wink (when exaggerated gender stereotypes are deliberately used), intentionality is more relevant.

5 It is curious that both these advertisements are set in the private domain. At a time when women in New Zealand appear to have gained equality in the public sphere and there are laws in place that are aimed at protecting public equality, perhaps it is easier to construct (whether ironically or not) traditional gender roles in the private sphere.

6 The Frankfurt School in the 1930s envisioned the media as having an effect like a hypodermic syringe, and argued that the contents of the media were injected into the thoughts of the audience, who took them on uncritically. Some would regard this as an unfair simplification of the Frankfurt School’s work, but the stereotype persists because subsequent studies of the complexity of reception have highlighted the weaknesses of this aspect of what was, in other respects, an important, pioneering body of media research.

7 This reveals a weakness in the methodology of focus group interviews, and affirms the value of using written questionnaires in conjunction with interviews.

8 Socioeconomic factors seemed to play a part here, but I do not have space to outline this in more detail.

References


