

Women's Life-Stories in Narrative Advertisements: Ideal Subject/ Subject Positioning

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Abstract. Story telling is important in advertising as a means to influence consumer perception. The aim of this paper is to examine how subject positioning inscribed into narrative ads featuring life-stories of women is integral to the construction of an ideal audience, which in turn has implications that go beyond product- or brand-perception to that of female subjectivity.

Keywords: life-story, narrative ads, ideal audience, subject positioning, female subjectivity.

1. Rationale and Objective

The impetus for this paper comes from a consciousness of the impact advertisements have, through their very ubiquity, on the way we see ourselves and the world around us. Ads which narrate the life-stories of women form an important source for the way readers/viewers perceive their lives and selves, experiences and times. As fictional constructions they are so culturally embedded that the 'self' and its life-story represented are not just an individual's but an articulation of other lives. Thus gender, and in particular woman, is a textual construction rather than a material given, as is noted in Simone de Beauvoir's well-known observation that a woman is not born, but made. This is particularly applicable to advertising which core business is to influence consumer perception. Obviously, how the story is constructed will position the subject in a particular way and this, in turn, will affect the reader's or audience's perception of the subject. The aim of this paper is to examine how subject positioning inscribed into narrative ads featuring life-stories of women is integral to the construction of an ideal audience, which in turn has implications that go beyond product- or brand-perception to that of female subjectivity.

2. 'Narrative', 'Story' and 'Life-Story' in Advertisements

'Narrative' and 'story' as terms are sometimes used interchangeably in ordinary parlance, but narratologists often make a distinction between the two. A common view is captured by Abbott (2002:16) who defines 'story' as an event or sequence of events (the action) while 'narrative' is the representation of the event(s). However, as Marie-Laure Ryan (in Herman, et al, 2005:347) astutely points out, 'events are not in themselves stories but rather the raw material out of which stories are made'. In fact, she argues that story is as much a representation as narrative, but unlike narrative, 'it is not a representation encoded in material signs'. Story is a mental image, which is evoked by a narrative through its discursal form (hence narrative is a combination of story and discourse).

Seeing story as a cognitive construct rather than as actual events is obviously more reflective of what a story is in advertisements. This is because ads as a discourse are marked heavily by gapping, so that 'events' indicated are only suggestive of the story behind them. Consequently, 'life-story' is also a cognitive construct. As found in other modes of life-story telling, that in ads refer to certain culturally defined landmark events such as career milestones, marriage, childbirth, major illness, and so on. I also include

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...events in their life not only make up a large part of how we understand a subject's life but also serve as a basis of persuasion for buying or using the product. Further, due to the temporal and spatial constraints of a 'life-story' is used in a modified sense to refer to discontinuous but defining events that give an intimation of the subject's life. The form of ad texts relies on the reader or viewer to mobilize a variety of cognitive abilities to 'write the story' from setting up relations between (a) representation and event that can be located in the past, an on-going present or, I suggest, also in the future (as in referring to recurrent events that will benefit from the product advertised in some future use), and (b) the entities given in the text, and other extratextual information (linguistic, social and cultural). All these are present in the Acuvue ad.



Fig. 1: Acuvue Ad

The text in the bottom left corner reads: 'Created to subtly enhance the innate beauty of your eyes, 1-DAY ACUVUE DEFINE Brand Contact Lenses make your eyes appear naturally larger and more vibrant. A fresh, new pair every day helps to reduce deposit and protein build-up, making them comfortable and healthier to wear. So whether you're going on a date, to a function, or shopping with the girls, just dress your eyes and shine.' The reference to recurrent events in the character's life (and by extension, the female reader's in being addressed directly by the pronoun 'you') suggests these events form a significant portion of a female life-story. It capitalizes on conventional and stereotypical views of what girls do and what's important to them, and attaches a suggested enhancement to such a way of living.

3. Constructed Ideal Subject

Characteristic of much advertising is the disjunction between the textual subject (usually indexed as 'I' or 'you') and the referential subject. In Fig. 1, a close up of the girl's head tells us who the textual subject is as an individual, but functionally she is representative rather than particular so that the reader can, if she so wishes, read herself into the subject's position. The intermediary between such a textual construction and the actual reader is what Fairclough (2001:41) calls 'ideal subject': '...since all discourse producers must produce with *some* interpreter in mind, what media producers do is address an *ideal subject*, be it viewer, or listener, or reader. Media discourse has built into it a subject position for an ideal subject, and actual viewers or listeners or readers have to negotiate a relationship with the ideal subject.'

The second person address is common in ads as this is one way the ad producer gets round the problem of impersonality created by the lack of a face-to-face interaction with the reader. As Cook (2001:161) says, 'Ads are ... intrusive. Their 'you' is part of a high-involvement strategy which attempts to win us over by very direct address; they step uninvited into our world, expressing interest in our most intimate concerns.' The producer addresses a mass audience but speaks as though he knows the reader intimately. This 'compensatory tendency' is what Fairclough (2001:52) calls 'synthetic personalization'. Through it, the ideal subject is constructed, with whom the actual reader is invited to identify.

The actual reader is of course not a totally passive subject. There are essentially two ways she can negotiate a relationship with the ideal subject: one is to accept the way a text addresses her, and the other is to resist through a more critical reading from consciousness-raising. Passive acceptance often happens in unself-aware and uncritical reading that allows the ad to seduce her into naturalizing the constructed textual self, and thus encouraging her to merge her own self with the projected image in the ad. In this way, the reader is positioned imaginarily as or with the subject in the text. This is one reason why many ads, especially on beauty and luxury, make use of some celebrity to endorse their product as 'attempts to contact or lay claim to another identity' (Sontag, quoted in Stanley 1992:48). The narrative mode reminds one of the fictional nature of such ads, but at the same time, through the often generic reference it also encourages a slip into quasi-realist reading.

Feminist research claims that the 'ideal subject' is also a gendered position that is predominantly male (see Fetterley, Williamson, and Mills) and, Mills goes on to argue, even where 'there is an attempt to position the reader as female, the address is destined for a male as voyeur'. (1995:67) Thus, a reader may consider 'dressing the eyes' in the Acuvue ad as an extension of the social practice of paying attention to appearance for the pleasure of the male gaze. Whether or not one agrees with the feminist stand on gendered positioning, its awareness gives the reader an option to take on the second way of reading with resistance. Such awareness is sharpened with the realization that there are, in fact, at least three ways in which the reader or viewer is 'coaxed' into identifying with the ideal subject, as discussed below.

3.1. Positioning

In Fig.1, as in all textual representations, positioning is integral to the way our perception and sense-making are constructed. Positioning is allied to location, in a literal and figurative sense, in a manner that suggests notions of 'self', 'identity' and 'subjectivity'. Positioning has a two-way orientation: (a) in the way characters are situated in relation to one another in space and time; and (b) in the way social locations are defined for the reading/viewing subject vis-à-vis the story told in the context of the ad. These orientations indicate that subjectivity may be inscribed or constructed in the process of interaction. More specifically, positioning can be viewed in the passive as 'being positioned' or more actively with a sense of the agentive in the subject (i.e. reader) positioning itself. In the first instance, social, historical and biological factors determine the subject (described as 'a world-to-subject direction of fit' by Bamberg in Herman, et al 2005:10), whereas in the second case ('a subject-to-world direction of fit'), the subject actively engages in constructing itself and its world by acting as its own agent in positioning itself. Much of the time positioning takes place somewhere in between, with some construction by the discourse and some self-determination.

The ad in Fig. 2 has a woman standing in front of a car looking directly at the reader with her life summed up in 'exact percentages' represented by a pie chart as well as in the tag line. Figuratively, the car is a substitute for her life which is expressed in terms associated with emotions: 'fun', 'practicality', 'taste for adventure', 'indulgence', 'thrift' and 'shopping mania'. These abstract words evoke mental images of events which are concretized by the reader who draws on the images given in the chart and, for a 'serious' reader (such as one who studies the ad to consider a purchase), on her own subjective experience and understanding of what constitutes 'fun', 'practicality', and so on. From the way the model is placed in close proximity with a child and looking at her indulgently, as well as the way she holds up the paper bags (which do not look like they contain groceries), the textual subject is positioned socially as one whose life is spent in leisurely enjoyment (note her dressing), made possible by a car that helps her to save (23% thrift). The reader is also invited to equate the exact percentages in the pie chart with the 100% protectiveness afforded by the car, which in turn sums up the subject and her life.

Two distinct textual features in this ad help to define the social location of the reader: the gaze and linguistic address. The direct gaze at the reader is what Kress and van Leeuwen call a 'demand': 'the participant's gaze ... demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her.' (1999:381) Further, the smile on the model's face invites the reader to 'enter a relation of social affinity' with her. This visual address complements the pronouns 'you' and 'your' which make the reader a part of this world.

Although the model is female and the life-story enacted revolves culturally around the female, a male reader is also positioned by the text through the left column of technical specifications of the car (which conventionally are found in 'male ads' on cars and gadgets), and socially located as the protector of his household. The direct gaze of the model may then make him think of his wife and her activities, and how buying her this car will fit well into her life. What is suggested in this reading is the presence of what Lury calls a 'contradictory tendency' where 'the targeting of women as a key market... is cross-cut by an attempted masculinisation of the viewing or reading subject.' (2001:392).

SX4
SEDAN

The new Suzuki SX4 Sedan is you on all four wheels. It has your sense of fun, your practicality, your taste for adventure. In the exact percentages of the life you live. Whoever you are, whatever you do, it's a car you can see yourself in. Quite literally.

100% Protectiveness

- 1.6 litre VVT engine.
- Bigger cabin space in its class.
- Auto climate control.
- 8 speaker audio system with steering wheel integrated audio switches.
- Large capacity trunk of 525 litres.
- Dual front airbags.
- ABS + EBD + BA.
- ISOFIX child seat anchorage.

Fully imported from Japan

37% Indulgence
23% Thrift
40% Shopping mania

The sum of you.

Raya Gift Special
1 September - 31 October 2008
Exclusively from BHB BANK GROUP

2.85%

SUZUKI Way of Life!

For further enquiries, kindly dial 1-800-88-6699 or log on to www.suzuki.net.my

Fig. 2: Suzuki Ad

3.2. Hailing

Positioning and being positioned is bound up with the notion of 'hailing' or interpellation which was first propounded by Althusser to refer to the positioning of an individual when she responds to an address. Althusser's much-cited example is that of a police officer calling out 'Hey you'; in responding to this the individual casts herself as a subject who is positioned in relation to an authority. Similarly, the reader is 'hailed' or interpellated into a position of subjecthood (i.e. an individual as subject as well as subjected) by the language and images of a text. Because of displaced interaction in advertising, the reader can adopt any number of the following positions: one who is directly addressed; one who is indirectly addressed; one who overhears (i.e. eavesdrops). But whether or not the text's hailing is intended for her or received by her, it nevertheless has an effect on her.

Moreover, because the reader is a social being with 'complex histories and multiple cultural affiliations', hailing does not always result in an unproblematic positioned subject as only a woman or man. The actual reader always 'exceed the subject implied by the text' (Mills 1995:79), so that it is in fact unrealistic to see subject positioning in terms that universalize the female subject; on the contrary, multiple positionings and multiple negotiations are possible.

3.3. Stereotyping

Stereotypes make it possible for us to form generalizations about a person or advertised character without requiring a great deal of information or evidence. They draw on the 'obvious', the 'natural', something 'everyone knows'. As such, it does not 'require' a response from the reader as what is given is self-evidently true and is therefore not contested or held to be contestable. The tight constraints of space and time for an ad means that stereotyping is frequently resorted to say more than what is given. The less time we have to process information, the more likely we are to rely on stereotypes in drawing conclusions. As this requires the reader to fill in the gaps, stereotyping is a powerful means for positioning the subject. Unexamined stereotypes pose as information that is self-evidently true which, in a vicious circle, reinforces the subject's ideological position. Thus, an ad which positions domesticity as a woman's world will not usually be challenged.

4. Conclusion

An ad that tells a woman's life-story is always an artful construction within a narrative that more often than not employs subject positioning, among a variety of methods, to inscribe on the unsuspecting reader/viewer an ideology that is usually weighed in favour of the producer. This paper has attempted to show how subject positioning influences consumer perception with respect, not only to the promotion of product or brand but also, more significantly, the construction of female subjectivity that is not necessarily liberating for women.

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