

# The Case of the Disappearing Wedding Band: An Exploration into the Evolution of Marriage and Family in American Advertising (1920 – Present).

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*This research explores the presence of marital cues in American Advertising over time. It uses content analyses of popular American magazines to assess the changing use/presentation of marriage in advertising.*

## INTRODUCTION

*In light of changing socio-cultural mores regarding marriage, family, and interpersonal affiliation, it behooves marketers and other interested parties to explore the relationship between products with respect to the manner in which they are presented and the cultural values that may appear to be espoused in a given advertisement. For example, familial representations in advertisements often provide a relevant context and frame of reference for consumers as they aim to make sense of an advertisement (e.g., wedding reception, Thanksgiving dinner, etc.) (Otnes and Scott 1996; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Familiar settings (e.g., dinner table, bowling alley, or bedroom) aide consumers in developing an appropriate schema in which to process the advertising message (Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). Furthermore, consumers depend on a certain level of schema congruency to decipher conformant meanings (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989).*

*The encoding process employed by those who view advertisements relies in part on the use of cultural symbols within an accustomed context (Dotson and Hyatt 2000). The social construction of a symbol's meaning regardless of its subtle and/or ubiquitous presence functions as an important identifier in the message receiver's paradigm. One way to delve into the areas of interpersonal affiliation and consumption is to look at the concept of intimacy in light of semiotic (symbolic) manipulations (e.g., wedding bands) within an advertising context. Affiliation has been conceptualized as, "establishing, maintaining, or restoring a positive, affective relationship with another person or persons" (Atkinson, Heyns, and Veroff 1954 in Fiske and Taylor 1984, p.168).*

*Given that this type of advertising must first establish a "private and informal" association between models and then provide a "social context" for their interaction—acknowledging intimacy within an advertising framework involves a deeper level of cognitive effort on the part of the consumer than merely achieving a physiological response to stimulating advertisements (Belch, et al. 1982). The selected point of observation for this study is the presence (or absence) of a culturally recognized emblem of a relatively high-order social relationship (e.g., wedding bands) to begin the long-term efforts of deciphering the cognitive encoding process consumers use in evaluating ads. Understanding some of the expectations that compose consumers' "intimate context" schemas can enable marketers to achieve more effective message delivery. To be clear, this study does not equate marriage and intimacy, rather we seek to review the presence of marriage in advertising over time in route to a richer understanding of how one form of intimacy is conveyed in advertising. Our inquiry begins with observing the presence of such cues, and how the use and frequency of such cues has changed over time.*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Two areas to consider in exploring marriage portrayal in advertising within a socio-historical cultural context are 1) the impact of gender and 2) the role of symbols. Both areas employ principles from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as well as Mandler's Hypothesis (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). In a given advertisement both arguments and peripheral cues may have an effect under moderate levels of elaboration depending in part on the person's motivation and ability during message processing. This processing is also affected by the degree of congruity between the viewer's frame of reference and what is being viewed and processed. For example, how deeply a person holds a particular cultural symbol in their sphere of reference will guide how quickly they provide a contextual representation*

and framing of the symbol as it relates to the product (Dotson and Hyatt 2000).

From a historical perspective, U.S. print advertisements during 1950 – 1975 that feature women tended to position female consumers strictly within the context of home and family (Jaffe and Berger 1994). Accordingly, marriage cues, such as a wedding band, were present and even prominently displayed. A distinct shift in the way women were portrayed in advertising came on the heels of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Prakash 1992). Images that featured independent and assertive women in egalitarian settings (in relation to men) became more dominant than before, and such images co-existed with more traditional depiction of women as wife and mother (Jaffe and Berger 1994). These issues provide the chronological backdrop necessary for a more textured understanding of how images of relationships and intimacy in advertising have morphed over time.

## METHOD

The proposed method utilized for data collection in this preliminary investigation is content analysis. Because "content analysis is the study of the message itself and not the communicator or the audience" (Kassarjian 1977) a collection of ads that represent a range of products and targets will provide an ample starting point for additional research. The publications of interest are *Ladies Home Journal (LHJ)* and *Time* magazines from 1926 to 2006. We follow a similar rationale proposed by Gross and Sheth (1989) in that both magazines have a long, stable, and popular history in the US (both are steadily ranked among the top US magazines). The decision to use one title that was directed primarily at women (*LHJ*) and a leading news magazine (*Time*) allows us additional points of difference and parity in considering the practical work- and family-oriented pursuits of Americans that are represented in these publications.

We will review a randomized sampling of each publication (three per decade) and catalog all advertisements. No assumptions are being made at this stage about the viewer of the advertisement (e.g., gender or age); a total of five coders will be trained to document the following about each ad:

- 1) number of models present
- 2) whether or not the models are touching each other
- 3) presence of a wedding band
- 4) presence of some other form of visual marital clue (e.g., wedding gown, "his" and "her" decorations)
- 5) presence of some other form of verbal marital clue (e.g., language such as "husband", "wife", etc.)
- 6) implied familial setting (e.g., parent/child interaction)

We anticipate some adjustment to these categories during our pre-testing. Given the importance of both picture-based and verbal messages on information processing (Brown, Homer, and Inman 1998), persuasion (Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson and Unnava 1991), and affect (Hirschman 1986; McQuarrie and Mick 1992) reviewing the historical advertising context for employing cultural symbols will be a valuable contribution to the marketing discipline.

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