

THIS IS AN AD FOR MEN.

Hire more women in leadership roles. We're all worth it.



Historically, cosmetics companies and their advertisements have been aimed at women, with a particular focus on the depiction and selling of the myth of female sexuality through the male gaze. Nowadays, according to Huimin Xu and Yunying Tan, “more beauty advertisements are advocating to empower women by promoting the images of feminist independence”(2020). This campaign by L’oreal was run in March 2019 and was displayed in various “business environments” such as magazines or websites. It’s purpose is to illustrate the disparity between men and women in leadership roles, and to encourage men to entrust those roles to more women. It could also have a secondary purpose, which is to signal the company’s supposedly feminist values - “in consuming certain products, one buys not only a ‘thing’ but also an image” (Leymore, 1975).

The denotation of this image is a dark red background with a lighter red smear of nail varnish spilling out of its bottle. The shape gets larger to the right of the page, which is made to look like a rising trend on a graph showing the 20% growth in new patents over one year with women in leadership roles. There is a large, bold, capitalised font at the top in white, and various smaller pieces of text in gold. The page is balanced in colour and layout, with a similar balance of text to images on either side of the central makeup spill.

According to Judith Williamson, “The sign consists of the signifier, the material object and the signified, which is its meaning” (1978, p.25). This advert is not as clear cut as traditional adverts (with the purpose of directly selling) as it has multiple signs to make one message as a whole. The iconic sign (Barthes, 1957) of a traditional makeup advert, which will often use colours like dark red and gold to connote to women aspirational themes of sexuality, glamour and femininity, is used here in a slightly tongue-in-cheek way – the advert clearly states it is aimed at men however one would assume the opposite on first glance. This is initially quite humorous because, as Roland Barthes said, “there is a social prohibition against the feminisation of men” (1990, p.257). The contradictory nature of this advertisement is also a nod to Rene Magritte’s “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (Magritte, 1929) as it’s essentially saying “this is not what you think or assume it is”, which reflects a message about women as leaders; do not underestimate them or assume they won’t be as good, if not better than, a man.

The strapline “Hire more women in leadership roles. We’re all worth it” is written as though by a woman and is very directional, almost defiant, and refers to L’oreal’s famous slogan “because you’re worth it” (1973). This technique turns the company’s own iconic sign on its head, illustrating that as well as women being worth selling to, they are also worth investing in as leaders as it’s statistically profitable to do so.

Paradoxically, it is only when you read the writing that you understand what is actually signified in the image; The imagery of this spilt makeup initially registers as a normal makeup advert, but is revealed to have connotations of anger, passion, even blood, represented by the colour and the appearance of it having been physically thrown across the image. It should also be noted that the balanced layout of the page could be a reference to equality.

Bibliography

Barthes, R. (1957)(1983) *Mythologies and The Fashion System*, London: Paladin/Grafton, London: Vintage (should I put one bibliography entry for each book? Also should the date be the date they originally published the writing or the date the book you’ve read was published?)

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