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English 289H

December 2, 2011

Winning in the Femininity Game

James Truslow Adams defined the American Dream in 1931, stating that every citizen should have the opportunity to succeed according to ability. Though society has progressed enough for women to become important leaders, only those who draw attention to their femininity and attractiveness achieve widespread success in contemporary culture. In her article, “I Won. I’m Sorry,” Mariah Burton Nelson argues that there is a “strong but feminine” concept disseminated by the media that weakens women’s position in society (540). She observes that the media depicts successful females as subordinate to men by emphasizing their femininity, or weak daintiness, and attractiveness, or sex appeal. She argues that these depictions allow women to win male approval and, thus, success. This approach is somewhat expected in the entertainment business because of its natural focus on glamour and spectacle, yet these traits also factor into the success of women in talent and intellectually based careers like sports and politics. The notion that women need to be attractive and feminine in order to achieve success is observable through the rhetorical devices used in advertisements for political campaigns and sports.

Advertisements for female politicians utilize a sense of style, visual symbolism, and connotative language in order to highlight attractiveness and femininity. According to Nelson, these advertisements illustrate how women “want to win—to achieve, to reach new heights—but without exceeding male heights” (540). Her observations are evident in advertisements promoting former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and current presidential candidate Michele Bachmann.

Campaign advertisements employ a sense of style that conveys femininity and attractiveness in these female politicians. Nelson notes that “feminine behavior and attire mitigate against the affront of female victory [by] soften[ing] the hard edges of winning” (540). Michele Bachmann’s advertisements demonstrate this emphasis on traditional femininity through wardrobe choice. In all campaign photographs, her sleeveless dresses in understated colors and tailored, fashionable blazers with skirts reside in central positions in photographs. Sarah Palin’s advertisements demonstrate an emphasis on attractiveness through hair and makeup. Her hair detracts attention away from her face because of its highly stylized color and cut; her lips, fixed at the center of most photos, are treated with excessive lip-gloss until they appear wet, shiny, and sexual. Both women are depicted wearing clothing that accentuates their thin bodies. These advertisements contrast with promotions for male politicians like Mitt Romney, who appears strong and intelligent in plain suits, and Chris Christie, who does not need to hide or change his bigger body. These subtle style choices confirm Nelson’s observations about femininity and attractiveness in female leaders.

Campaign advertisements utilize visual symbolism to promote femininity and attractiveness. Nelson observes that because it is “not feminine to have a killer instinct,” the media “tempers [women’s] victories with softness, with smallness, [and] with smiles” (540). Courtney Martin further argues that the prominence of feminine smallness in the media “makes the grand potentiality of [women’s] lives as diminutive as possible” so that women do not appear to overpower men (608). The visual symbolisms for femininity in Bachmann’s advertisements evoke this softness and smallness. In one promotional photograph, Bachmann sits on her husband’s lap with her family, signifying her feminine vulnerability; this would never occur when male politicians like President Obama pose with their families. Similarly, camera angles help Bachmann appear smaller when she is standing with her husband or speaking to a group of people. The visual symbolism for femininity in Palin’s advertisements is her constant smiles, which represent unthreatening softness. Most male politicians take serious archetypal photographs in front of an American flag; in Palin’s version, she has a beauty-pageant smile. There are even photographs of Palin blowing kisses to her voters. These symbolic images support Nelson and Martin’s argument that it is only acceptable for women to compete for powerful positions if they appear less imposing than men.

The connotative language in campaign slogans calls attention to the femininity of these women politicians. According to Nelson, femininity is about accommodating men, or “allowing them to feel…superior to women, not emasculated by them” (540). Both Bachmann and Palin’s campaign slogans accomplish this by downplaying their potential power. The slogan “With Michele, There are no surprises” de-emphasizes the historical significance of a woman president; coupled with the casual use of her first name, this slogan trivializes female power. Similarly, the “Help Michele” slogan promotes feminine weakness and vulnerability. Palin’s “Join the Commonsense Conservative Revolution” ignores her leadership role and suggests that the power of her position resides in the audience. These slogans are drastically contrasting to Mitt Romney’s “America Needs a Conservative BUSINESS LEADER,” which highlights his potential power and ability. The connotative language in these advertisements supports Nelson’s observation that women must accommodate men in order to achieve success.

Advertisements for female sports utilize style, visual symbolism, and connotative language in order to highlight different aspects of attractiveness and femininity. Nelson points out that the media encourages these “female winners... [to] use femininity as a defense, a shield against accusations such as bitch, man-hater, [and] lesbian” by promoting “not ruthless, not aggressive, [and] not victorious” behavior (540). Deborah Blum also notes that “if there is indeed a biology to sex differences, [the media] amplifies it” (579), arguing that testosterone tendencies are celebrated in men but silenced in women. These observations are evident in advertisements for women’s tennis and basketball.

Sports advertisements for female athletes employ a sense of style that conveys femininity and attractiveness based in sex appeal. As Nelson discussed, femininity in sports is about appearing less aggressive and competitive. Thus, almost all advertisements, even action shots, promote fashionable femininity by featuring women athletes with perfect make up and hair. One action shot portrays female tennis player Magdalena Rybarikova hitting a ball in full make-up, lightly styled hair, diamond earrings and a pink dress. Whenever possible, sports advertisements promote attractiveness by showing female athletes on and off the court in tight, revealing clothing that accentuates their skinny, tanned bodies. Another tennis advertisement shows Caroline Wozniacki smiling and signing autographs in a sheer white shirt with her black sports bra clearly visible. These advertisements focus on the sex appeal of female athletes more than strength and talent, supporting Nelson’s argument that the media uses femininity and attractiveness as a defense.

Visual symbolism in sports advertisements promotes femininity and attractiveness through gender distinction. Blum observes that the difference between aggression in men and women “somehow gets amplified” in society (574). One advertisement for sports gear downplays the female athlete’s competitive drive by juxtaposing a male and female athlete. The male is wet with sweat, his arms raised in triumph, while the woman has rosy cheeks under her perfect make-up and celebrates with just one curled fist. A woman’s basketball advertisement featuring an athlete from Oklahoma State in mid-dribble promotes feminine daintiness; though her muscles are clearly defined, she is not sweating and maintains perfect hair, make-up, and even nail polish. Considering that advertisements for the men’s version of these sports include action-intensive images full of sweat, muscle, and aggression, there is supportive evidence for Blum’s argument.

Connotative language in sports advertisements emphasizes the importance of femininity and attractiveness over strength and power. Nelson argues that the media accentuates the “like woman... nonthreatening, pretty, and small” nature of female athletes rather than their “like men…smart and industrious” attitudes (545). On the women’s tennis homepage, there is an advertisement for Oriflame cosmetics that boasts “Moment of Success” accompanied by a female athlete with long blond hair in a white dress surrounded by flowers. This advertisement suggests that the beauty in this photograph embodies that moment of success for female athletes. The “Strong is Beautiful” slogan emblazoned across the tennis website is coupled with airbrushed female athletes in short dresses with make-up and free hair; it is impossible to even see the tennis racket in many of the photographs, indicating that the focus is on beauty, not strength. Even the slogan for a story on female basketball coach Connie Yori states that she “uncharacteristically had to ask for help,” suggesting inescapable feminine weakness. The connotative language in these advertisements supports Nelson’s claim that the media chooses to promote femininity and attractiveness in successful women.

The sense of style, visual symbolism, and connotative language used in advertisements for female sports and political campaigns promotes the notion that women need to be attractive and feminine in order to achieve success. In a society where the media is the most powerful vehicle of persuasion, this emphasis on feminine appearance and behavior has shaped American culture. It is not surprising that this emphasis has resulted in limited power and influence of women in modern society, as young women are overwhelmingly instructed that their worth lies in their femininity and attractiveness and not in their intellect and capacity to lead. Hopefully, society will continue to progress into what Adams saw in the promise of the American Dream.

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