

Who Decides What Women Look Like? Leadership Representation and Gendered Media
Portrayals in Advertising

By

Avery Petrie

CAMS 4381

Communications Studies Senior Thesis

Abstract

This comprehensive literature review synthesizes research across communication studies, feminist media theory, advertising scholarship, and organizational communication to examine how women's representation in leadership positions influences the portrayal of women in advertising. Decades of scholarship show that advertising has historically sexualized, objectified, and narrowly depicted women, while organizational studies document systemic gender gaps in executive and creative roles. This review maps major debates, theoretical frameworks, and findings that shape scholarly understanding of this topic. Scholars generally agree that leadership composition shapes representational practices, though important gaps remain in causality, intersectionality, and industry-specific analysis. The review concludes by emphasizing the significance of organizational power structures for understanding mediated gender norms and identifying future research opportunities.

Introduction

Advertising is one of the most influential communicative forces shaping cultural ideas about gender, identity, sexuality, and power. For decades, scholars have documented the persistent sexualization and objectification of women in commercial media. At the same time, research on organizational communication and gendered labor highlights the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, especially in industries responsible for producing media content. This literature review brings these areas together to address the central question: How does the presence or absence of women in executive or creative leadership roles relate to the ways women are portrayed in advertising? Bringing these bodies of research together, this review maps six key areas of scholarly debate: gendered

organizational leadership, theories of media representation, the gender composition of creative labor in advertising, postfeminist advertising, empirical studies connecting leadership demographics to media portrayals, and cultural implications of gendered advertising. This question matters to communication studies because it bridges organizational structures with media output, demonstrating how power within institutions shapes cultural messages.

Advertising scholarship has extensively examined the representation of women on screen, but less attention has been given to the gendered power dynamics behind the cameras. Leadership and creative roles within advertising and marketing agencies hold significant influence over which narratives are deemed marketable and are approved. Consequently, they have immense influence over which voices are seen and heard. Organizational research consistently shows that women are underrepresented in these decision-making positions. This imbalance raises questions about how leadership demographics shape not only office culture, but the cultural messages amplified through advertisement as well.

Literature Review

Gender and Organizational Leadership

Organizational communication research emphasizes that women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, especially at the executive and creative-director levels. Eagly and Carli's (2007) "labyrinth" model describes the non-linear and often obstructed path women face when advancing toward leadership. This model reframes women's leadership challenges as a winding, complicated journey rather than a single invisible barrier, like the "Glass Ceiling". Instead of facing one moment where advancement stops, women encounter

repeated obstacles at every stage of their careers. These barriers include gender stereotypes, biased evaluations, work–family expectations, lack of mentorship, and organizational cultures built around male norms. While many women do eventually reach leadership roles, they must continuously navigate detours and resistance that men are less likely to face. Studies consistently show that when women attain leadership positions, they often influence communication norms within their organizations. For example, gender diverse leadership teams tend to make more inclusive, ethical, and socially responsive decisions (Bear, Rahman, & Post, 2010). A key debate revolves whether women in leadership transform organizational practices or whether organizations that already value diversity simply promote more women. This debate is essential for understanding whether leadership demographics can alter advertising portrayals.

Beyond the structural barriers that women face to break through the “glass ceiling”, leadership norms within executive offices are often shaped by gendered expectations about authority and competence. Role congruity theory suggests that common leadership traits, such as assertiveness, dominance, and apt decision making, are culturally coded as masculine traits. Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that these traits are accepted less favorably when coming from a woman. Women tend to face higher levels of scrutiny and resistance, and experience constraints over their creative output, even after obtaining leadership positions.

Media Representation and Objectification

Research on gendered media representation provides the foundation for understanding portrayals of women in advertising. Feminist media scholars have long documented that women are disproportionately displayed through sexualization, passivity, and objectification.

Frameworks such as Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) explain how women's bodies are used as visual commodities for consumer appeal. Objectification theory provides a framework for understanding how images produced in marketing campaigns contribute to the internalization of beauty standards that are constantly imposed upon women, particularly young women. When women are depicted solely as bodies to be viewed, rather than active subjects or human beings, it encourages body-monitoring in young female viewers, which is linked to anxiety, shame, and lower values of self-worth (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Advertising's reliance on visual appeal strengthens these effects, particularly when marketing campaigns position empowerment as equal to physical attractiveness, following conventional beauty standards. As a result, even as some industries adopt empowerment-oriented advertising, scholars note that empowerment can become commercialized, sometimes reinforcing beauty norms rather than challenging them (Gill, 2008).

One example of this comes from a 2014 Victoria's Secret campaign entitled "The Perfect Body". This campaign featured several women wearing the brand's lingerie, with the phrase "The Perfect Body" in bold typeface pasted over the center of the image. The campaign was an attempt to advertise the brand's new lingerie line, "Body," by demonstrating the benefits of the different clothing items for different body types. However, the advertisement only pictured several very thin, conventionally attractive female models. Many viewers thought that the choice of models in combination with the title of the campaign spoke volumes about what the brand thinks of certain body types. After immense online outrage, the

campaign title was eventually changed. However, advertising remains a site where women are frequently reduced to their appearance or sexual appeal.

The backlash surrounding Victoria's Secret's 2014 "The Perfect Body" campaign illustrates how empowerment rhetoric can mask exclusionary beauty ideals. Although the campaign claimed to celebrate diverse body types through product fit, the visual execution featured only thin, conventionally attractive models, reinforcing a narrow definition of bodily perfection. Feminist scholars argue that such campaigns exemplify postfeminist advertising strategies that emphasize individual confidence while ignoring systemic exclusion (Gill, 2008). The public response to the campaign underscores how audiences increasingly recognize the disconnect between empowerment language and representational practices, highlighting the cultural consequences of creative decisions made within advertising organizations.

Creative Labor and Gender in the Advertising Industry

Another body of scholarship focuses on how advertising is produced within organizations. Studies reveal that creative departments and executive positions in advertising agencies remain heavily male dominated (Windels & Mallia, 2015). Creative directors, CMOs (Chief Marketing Officers), and agency executives, who hold power to approve campaign concepts, are overwhelmingly male. One study showed that only 29% of creative directors in advertising agencies were female, with later industry follow up showing that that number had dropped to roughly 11% in 2021 (Tackett, 2022). This imbalance affects representational choices in several ways. Research shows that male-led creative teams are more likely to rely on sexualization or narrow beauty standards, while women creative directors tend to advocate

for more realistic female portrayals and consider diverse consumer perspectives (Mallia, 2009). Scholars broadly argue that workplace demographics influence creative norms.

Conversely to Victoria Secret's "The Perfect Body" campaign, the woman-founded, women-led lingerie brand "Savage X Fenty" has a much more inclusive, diverse, and body positive approach to their marketing strategies. Founded by singer-songwriter Robyn Rihanna Fenty (more commonly referred to as Rihanna) in May of 2018, Savage X Fenty's mission statement is to "celebrate confidence, individuality, and inclusivity" (savagex.com). The brand consistently features models of varied body types and sizes, races, gender identities, and visible disabilities. These advertisements shift away from the typical, narrow ideal and towards inclusivity, confidence, and self-expression. Rihanna, as the creative director, has the final say over her brand's visual identity, and her leadership authority translates into representational change, not just surface-level diversity marketing. Scholars argue that such representational shifts are more likely to occur when women hold greater decision-making power over casting, styling, and visual framing (Windels & Mallia, 2015). The comparison between Victoria's Secret's and Savage X Fenty's campaign initiatives enforces the idea that true representational change in advertising cannot simply be a response to consumer backlash but is closely tied with the identity of the person who holds creative power within the organization.

Postfeminist Advertising and the Commodification of Empowerment

Contemporary advertising increasingly employs postfeminist rhetoric that frames empowerment as a matter of individual choice, confidence, and self-expression rather than collective structural change. Gill (2008) argues that postfeminist media culture rearticulates

feminist language while simultaneously detaching it from critiques of power, inequality, and exclusion. In advertising, this often manifests through campaigns that promote body confidence while continuing to privilege narrow beauty ideals.

This form of empowerment branding aligns with neoliberal logics that position self-improvement and consumption as pathways to liberation. Rather than challenging systemic norms, postfeminist advertising encourages women to feel empowered through purchasing products that promise confidence or desirability. Scholars caution that such strategies obscure the structural conditions under which representation is produced, shifting responsibility onto individual women to feel confident rather than addressing institutional inequities within media industries.

The persistence of postfeminist advertising underscores the importance of examining organizational leadership, as creative decisions are shaped by institutional priorities and market pressures. Without meaningful shifts in leadership authority, empowerment rhetoric risks reproducing the same objectifying frameworks it claims to resist. This tension highlights the need to analyze how feminist language is mobilized within advertising organizations and whose interests it ultimately serves.

Empirical Links Between Leadership and Advertising Portrayals

The most directly relevant scholarship examines correlations between women's leadership representation and portrayals of women in advertisements. Findings reveal that companies with more women in leadership positions produce fewer sexist or stereotypical ads, gender diverse creative teams generate more authentic gender portrayals (Grow & Broyles, 2011), female CMOs prioritize ethical branding (Champlin et al., 2019), and agencies led by

women create campaigns with lower rates of sexualization (Windels, Mallia, & Broyles, 2013). These studies suggest that when more women have decision-making power, portrayals of women tend to shift away from objectification and toward multidimensional representation. However, the question of causality remains unresolved.

Despite consistent correlations between women's leadership representation and less sexist advertising content, methodological limitations complicate causal interpretation. Many studies rely on content analyses that identify patterns without directly examining decision-making processes within agencies. Additionally, leadership gender is often treated as a binary variable, overlooking differences in race, sexuality, and class. These limitations suggest the need for qualitative research methods, such as interviews and ethnographic studies, to better understand how leadership identity translates into creative influence.

Audience Reception and Cultural Consequences of Gendered Advertising

While much of the literature focuses on production and representation, scholars also emphasize the importance of audience reception in understanding the cultural consequences of advertising portrayals. Research suggests that repeated exposure to objectifying images contributes to the normalization of narrow beauty standards, shaping how women perceive themselves and others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). These portrayals do not operate in isolation, but accumulate over time, reinforcing cultural expectations about femininity, desirability, and worth.

Advertising's influence is amplified by its ubiquity across media platforms, making leadership decisions within advertising organizations particularly consequential. When leadership teams prioritize narrow representations, these choices contribute to broader cultural

narratives that marginalize bodies and identities outside dominant norms. Conversely, inclusive advertising has been shown to foster greater identification and trust among audiences, particularly among consumers who feel historically excluded from mainstream media.

Understanding leadership influence therefore requires connecting organizational decision-making to its cultural effects. Advertising agencies function as powerful intermediaries between corporate interests and public meaning-making, positioning leadership demographics as a critical factor in shaping mediated gender norms.

Synthesis of Scholarly Themes

Across these bodies of research, several themes emerge: leadership composition influences representational practices, creative departments act as cultural gatekeepers, diverse leadership correlates with more ethical portrayals, and organizational culture shapes women's influence. These themes demonstrate how organizational and media studies intersect in explaining gendered portrayals. Together, the literature shows a multi-faceted relationship between leadership demographics and gendered portrayals in advertising. Leaders set expectations for what is considered acceptable, profitable, or risky in advertising content, while creative teams translate these expectations into visual and narrative form. This framework positions advertising agencies, not merely as commercial and marketing entities, but as communicative institutions whose internal power dynamics have much broader cultural implications.

At the same time, the literature reveals important tensions regarding the extent of women's influence in leadership roles. While increased representation correlates with less

stereotypical portrayals, scholars caution against assuming that women leaders uniformly challenge dominant norms. Organizational constraints, client expectations, and market pressures can limit the degree to which leaders enact representational change. As Eagly and Carli's (2007) labyrinth model suggests, women's leadership authority is often negotiated within gendered systems that may constrain dissent from established creative conventions. These findings complicate narratives of automatic progress and underscore the importance of examining power, not just presence.

Creative departments emerge across the literature as cultural gatekeepers that mediate between organizational leadership and public-facing media content. Decisions regarding casting, visual framing, tone, and narrative structure are not merely aesthetic choices, but reflect underlying assumptions about gender, desirability, and consumer appeal. When leadership is demographically homogeneous, these assumptions are more likely to go unchallenged, reinforcing narrow portrayals of women. Conversely, gender-diverse leadership can broaden creative perspectives, introducing alternative narratives that challenge dominant norms. This gatekeeping function highlights how representation is embedded within institutional routines rather than driven solely by individual intent.

Gaps in the Field and Future Directions

Several gaps remain: causality is underexplored, intersectional perspectives are limited, industry variation needs attention, middle-level creative labor is understudied, and digital advertising raises new questions. While studies consistently show a correlation between gender diverse leadership and multidimensional portrayals of women, causality is difficult to determine without more qualitative research in the field. Do firms who hire more women in

positions of leadership then produce more diverse and dimensional content, or do firms who believe in inclusivity and empowerment tend to hire more women? This gap generates a need for qualitative research methods such as future interviews, ethnographic observation, and case studies on specific brands undergoing representational change, internally and externally.

Another significant gap in the literature concerns intersectionality. Much of the existing research primarily focuses on gender. Fewer studies examine how race, sexuality, disability, or body size also intersect with representation in the media. Women of color, in particular, are significantly underrepresented in executive and creative suite leadership roles. Future research much address these intersections to avoid reproducing a new exclusionary framework under the guise of inclusion. These gaps highlight opportunities for future research and demonstrate how many scholars believe that evolving media environments may shift representational power.

An additional gap in the literature concerns middle-level creative labor within advertising agencies. While scholarship often focuses on executive leadership or high-profile creative directors, far less attention is paid to mid-level roles such as copywriters, art directors, associate creative directors, and brand strategists. These professionals play a critical role in shaping campaign narratives, visual framing, and messaging, yet typically operate under both executive oversight and client constraints. Scholars suggest that middle-level creatives may possess limited autonomy to challenge dominant representational norms, particularly in organizations with rigid hierarchies or risk-averse cultures. Examining how gender operates at this level of creative labor would provide greater insight into how leadership values are translated, or diluted, through everyday creative decision-making. Attention to middle-level

creative labor also complicates assumptions that representational change flows directly from executive leadership, highlighting the need for multi-level analyses of organizational power. Future research focused on these roles could help clarify how institutional power flows within advertising organizations and where opportunities for representational change are most constrained or enabled.

Finally, digital advertising and social media platforms introduce new dynamics that complicate traditional leadership structures. Influencer marketing, brand collaborations, and algorithmic distribution systems raise questions about who holds representational power in contemporary advertising environments. Examining how leadership operates within these evolving contexts presents a critical direction for future scholarship and reinforces the importance of organizational analysis in understanding mediated gender norms.

Conclusion

This field of research holds important implications for the advertising industry. Consumers are increasingly demanding authenticity and ethical representation, and diversity in leadership may play a crucial role in shaping this brand credibility as representational change, not just surface-level inclusivity. Examining advertising through the lens of organizational power highlights how meaningful change depends not only on creative intent, but also on who holds decision-making power on executive levels.

The scholarship reviewed shows strong connections between women's leadership representation and portrayals of women in advertising, focusing on the four key areas of current literature: gendered organizational leadership, theories of media representation, the gender composition of creative labor in advertising, and empirical studies that connect diverse

leadership demographics to diverse media portrayals. While advertising has historically relied on sexualized portrayals, research suggests that greater gender diversity in leadership correlates with more empowered and complex representations. Significant questions remain regarding causality and intersectionality. By situating leadership demographics alongside media representation, this review emphasizes the importance of studying organizations as communicative institutions whose power dynamics shape cultural messages.

Works Cited

- “About Us - Savage X Fenty.” Savage X Fenty, www.savagex.com/about.
- Åkestam, N. (2017). Can brands heal societal wounds? A theory of socially responsible advertising. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(3), 393–415.
- Bear, S., Rahman, N., & Post, C. (2010). The impact of board diversity and gender composition on corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(2), 207–221.
- Champlin, S., Sterbenk, Y., Windels, K., & Poteet, M. (2019). How advertising practitioners view gender portrayals in advertising. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 40(3), 310–330.
- Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders*. Harvard Business Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women’s lived experiences. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173–206.
- Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18(1), 35–60.
- Grow, G., & Broyles, S. J. (2011). The ethical implications of female sexualization in advertising. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 26(2), 111–126.
- Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can’t Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*. Touchstone.
- Mallia, K. L. (2009). Rare birds: Why so few women become ad agency creative directors. *Advertising & Society Review*, 10(3).
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Tackett, Teresa. “Mad (Wo)Men: How Female Creative Leaders in Advertising Resisted a Male-Dominated Leadership Culture.” UNC Carolina Digital Repository, 2022, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/ns064g735>.
- Warren, Rossalyn. “Victoria’s Secret Has Changed Its ‘Perfect Body’ Slogan after a Body-Shaming Backlash.” BuzzFeed News, BuzzFeed News, 6 Nov. 2014, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rossalynwarren/victorias-secret-appears-to-have-changed-its-controversial-p.

- Windels, K., & Mallia, K. L. (2015). How being female impacts learning and career growth in advertising creative departments. *Employee Relations*, 37(1), 122–140.
- Windels, K., Mallia, K., & Broyles, S. J. (2013). The gendered nature of advertising agencies: Creatives' perceptions of gender roles. *Journal of Advertising*, 42(1), 111–123.