



Turning the Tide

Washing powder advertising has changed as society has changed but is this just superficial marketing? Caroline Birks looks at Tide over the years and asks whether it's washing whiter or leaving a nasty stain.

ON GENDER REPRESENTATION





If you're a media student studying with Eduqas, you will already be familiar with the Tide advert that is one of the set texts. This is the advert from the 1950s where a housewife gazes lovingly at a box of Tide while the heading screams 'Tide's got what women want!'. She wears clothes similar to the WWII poster girl, Rosie the Riveter and stands in a similar pose too. Although this intertextual reference could be viewed as empowering, ultimately it serves to remind women that the best thing they can do during this period of history, is support their husbands (and their country) by getting back into the kitchen. The female is positioned below the box of Tide, connoting that her role in the household is lesser than a cleaning product. Even though she faces the domestic drudgery and hard work of laundry, she is still more passive than a box of washing powder.

But this set text wasn't the only Tide commercial featuring 'the housewife' at this time. If you look at any Tide advert from this period, you will see a similar formula with the housewife character reliant on the product in order to complete her domestic chores. We might apply Stuart Hall's ideas about media representation here: the repetition of this stereotype reduces women to a few key traits, suggesting that women are naturally inclined to, in this case, be nurturing and central to the domestic harmony of the family home. Even though it is over 70 years since the set Tide advert was released to audiences and there have been many changes in the world including four waves of feminism, it is possible to suggest that Tide adverts still contain

The repetition of this stereotype reduces women to a few key traits, suggesting that women are naturally inclined to, in this case, be nurturing and central to the domestic harmony of the family home.

harmful gender stereotyping and still place women firmly in the domestic sphere.

Tide adverts have become more sophisticated over the years. No longer do we see the hand drawn illustrations of the 1950s but in the 2018 'It's a Tide Ad' campaign, we see a clever post-modern bricolage of familiar advertising tropes combined to create a humorous and impactful message. The advert, which aired during a Super Bowl advert break, caused a massive impact, instantly trending and getting audiences questioning the adverts they were seeing. The 'It's a Tide Ad' starring David Harbour turned every commercial into a Tide advert by claiming that if it featured clean clothes, it was an advert for Tide. Although it was a clever pastiche of traditional advertising, there were still plenty of gender stereotypes, this time foregrounding traditional representations of masculinity and largely excluding women.

In the advert, David Harbour is the active participant constructing masculinity as the dominant gender and demonstrating Liesbet van Zoonen's theory. In the first few seconds of the commercial, Harbour is seen driving a sports car, drinking and making jokes with friends in a bar, modelling perfume, watching a horse at a ranch and working with car insurance salesmen. Later, we will see him in a shaving advert and he will also take on a hyper-masculine appearance as part of a protein advert. At each location he talks about the type of advert we're seeing. His voice is deep and authoritative as he talks to the audience

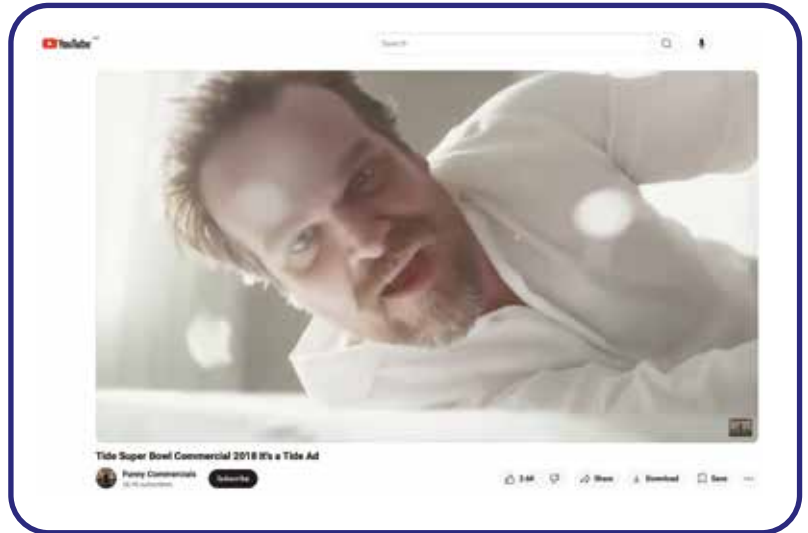


Engin Akyurt / Unsplash



and to the characters in the advert. He corrects them, answers their questions and occasionally interrupts them. The first time we see a woman in the advert is as part of the jewellery section where Harbour places a diamond necklace around her neck. Here the lighting is romantic and there is use of soft focus and lap dissolves to mimic the slow and dreamy feel of traditional jewellery adverts. As the woman looks gratefully at Harbour, he addresses the audience directly, interrupting the jewellery advert voiceover and correcting us saying 'No. Tide'. Here Harbour clearly demonstrates the power and dominance of men. He has authority and control and is able to move between different scenarios to deliver his message. This once again highlights the idea of men as active and women as passive. Additionally, the woman is used for decorative purposes bringing glamour to the advert. She meets stereotypical beauty standards and her gaze is submissive.

David Harbour in his 'Tide ad' whites



YouTube



Mike Mozart / Flickr



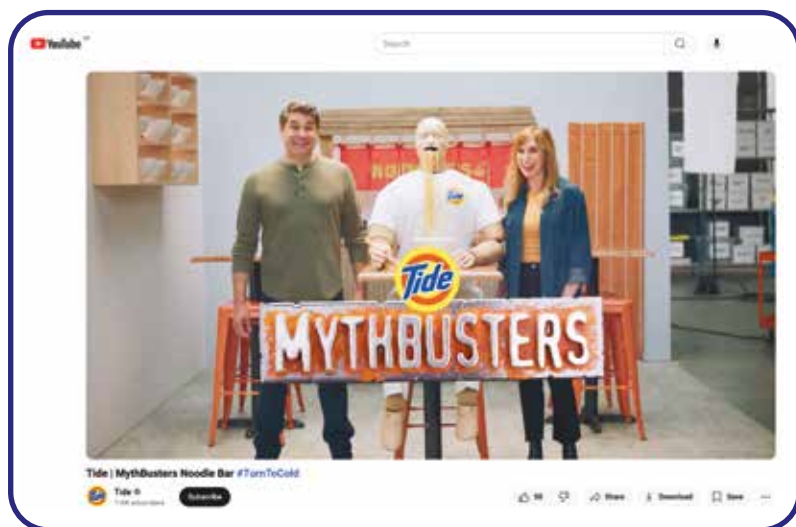
Not Gillette... 'It's a Tide ad!'



There are other women in the 'It's a Tide Ad' commercial and they fulfil other stereotypes surrounding gender. There is the suggestion that women are communal when they are seen as part of small groups and of course, there is the mother figure towards the end. We do not see her doing the laundry but we do see her in the family home sitting with her children, with a basket of washing in the foreground. Unlike the 1950s Tide advert we do not see anyone doing the laundry. Harbour is never seen loading the washing machine or holding a bottle of washing liquid. The implication of this perhaps being, that as a male, he doesn't need to wash his own clothes.

So, although this advert is lots of fun, the underlying ideologies are concerning in terms of gender. They take an even more worrying turn if we consider ethnicity. Very rarely do we see people of colour in the advert and white males are always seen in positions of power, actively moving the narrative forward. We could argue that by combining lots of existing advertising stereotypes the commercial deliberately highlights negative representations in the media and challenges the audience to reflect upon these. If we were being generous, we could argue that the advert is doing more than selling a washing powder. Perhaps it is encouraging the audience to reflect on the influence of the media in their own lives.

Gender balance: Tide's recent 'Mythbusters' ads



An advert which is more clearly selling Tide as a product is the 2024 advert 'Laundry Questions', in which everyone in the household is responsible for doing the washing. The whole family are seen at different times noticing stains and loading the washing machine. Central to this is the bottle of Tide which gets passed from person to person as the answer to all their laundry questions.

Doing laundry is everyone's job in 'Laundry Questions'



However, in this advert it is still women who are the most knowledgeable about laundry. As the mother comes through the front door carrying groceries, she has questions fired at her by her children. One asks 'Is yellow a light or a dark' the other asks about cleaning a stain. Fortunately, she tells us, Tide is the answer to all of these questions connoting that the product makes her life easier and once again it is the product that is doing the hard work.

Although the mother figure is clearly active in this advert, her knowledge and authority comes from her role in the domestic sphere. Even though the whole family are now responsible for doing the laundry, it is the mum that is the expert answering a range of fairly dull questions. At the end of the advert she tells us that because Tide answers all the laundry questions, she is able to

YouTube



concentrate on answering all the others, which turn out to be equally mundane and equally stereotypical in her role as mother.

There are lots of other Tide adverts online including 'Stains happen to the best of us' which takes Tide away from the domestic and into the sporting sphere featuring members of the USA Olympic team. In this advert the Olympians are all male, again excluding women from anything that doesn't involve the family home. Another series of adverts called 'Mythbusters', takes a more scientific approach, proving that Tide can clean stains at a lower temperature. There is more equality in these adverts with the male and the female 'mythbuster' seeming to have equal knowledge about laundry. Perhaps this demonstrates a more progressive side to Tide's advertising campaigns.

Overall, representation of gender in Tide adverts doesn't seem to have changed that much since the 1950s. At the heart of modern Tide commercials is family and at the head of the family is the mother. Women run the home and use Tide to help them. However, as we'd expect,

They take an even more worrying turn if we consider ethnicity. Very rarely do we see people of colour in the advert and white males are always seen in positions of power, actively moving the narrative forward.

one area where Tide adverts have changed is the overall style and production values. Now they feature more celebrities, more humour and more scientific focus on what the product can do. By producing a wider range of adverts, Tide appeals to the media savvy audiences of today.

.....
Caroline Birks was until recently a Film and Media Studies teacher and makes videos as part of Like Maria. She works for Into Film.

References

Watch 'It's a Tide ad' here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpaLHwwYxE8>

Watch 'Laundry Questions' here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhftJlapNGY>

Watch Tide's 'Mythbusters' ad here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I0DITXeWTY>

Annie Spratt / Unsplash

