

Women and Sport

An Examination of Advertisements Between 1950 and 2002

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Un document publié par l'Association canadienne pour l'avancement des femmes dans les sports (ACAFS) aimerait voir les athlètes féminines attirer davantage l'attention des médias. Cette assertion pose problème quand on sait que la publicité autour des athlètes canadiennes tend à normaliser leur image au goût du jour et conséquemment reconferme qui et quoi est considéré féminin ou masculin.

In 1999, the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) and Nike Canada organized a "Women in Sport" symposium. Two key recommendations that emerged were a need to increase media coverage of women athletes and increased levels of corporate sponsorship for women athletes. Recently, The Woman's Television Sports Network (WTSN) was launched in Canada as a women's version of The Sports Network (TSN). It is worth noting, however, that in 1997 the "women's version" of *Sports Illustrated*, *Women/Sport* was launched in the United States with dubious results for women in sport (cited in Rounds). Kate Rounds surveyed *Women/Sport* for *Ms.* magazine and found anything but equal opportunity sports coverage. *Women/Sport* featured stories on a pregnant WNBA star, on a woman who was horrified to discover a baseball teammate was gay and on a professional tennis player who was retiring to become a "full-time wife" (22). Not surprisingly, an evaluation of the "men's" version of *Sports Illustrated* yielded no stories on "new dads," or about a male athlete becoming a full-time husband" (22). If

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In this article, I will argue that "adding women in" to the male-dominated and male-created professional sport-media complex will not be progressive for women athletes. It creates a space for women in an androcentric system, but at what cost? Sydney Millar and Bryna Kopelow's position paper for CAAWS, "Through a Gender Lens", acknowledges, "in pictures, females should be portrayed with dignity and modesty, especially with regard to clothing, body position and camera angles." However, taking a position against the objectification of the female athlete in the media, while at the same time endorsing increased participation in a media system that continues to objectify women, does not translate into change or action on behalf of women. Instead, this is

the continuation of an equity mandate that relies on the perpetrators of sexism to modify their behaviour, without recognizing that they have a financial stake in maintaining the current system.

To support my assertion that the current sports-media publicity system is not a favourable climate for women athletes, I will present the results of my preliminary research on the history of Canadian women in sport in advertisements. M. Ann Hall has argued, "the history of women in sport is a history of cultural resistance ... the very presence of women in the male preserve of sport is evidence of leaky hegemony" (101). While it is important to acknowledge the transgressive nature of women's participation in sport, it does not necessarily follow that a high-profile athlete will challenge the popular discourse of femininity. I contend that the representation of the "celebrity" woman athlete in advertisements has functioned to normalize their images within the discourse of the times and consequently reconfirm who and what is considered male/female.

The methodology for deconstructing the ads will draw on Latour's notion of inscriptions. In his essay "Drawing Things Together," Bruno Latour develops a theory of history *qua* visualization that argues historical change can be understood by examining "simple modifications in the way in which groups of people argue with one another using paper, signs, prints and diagrams" (21). A change in *worldview* is literally seen as a change in "how a culture *sees* the world, and makes it visible" (30) I will look at the visual cues in selected



advertisements and ask, has there been a change in “worldview” reflected in the representation of Canadian woman athletes in advertising over the last fifty years?

I have selected four ads as representative of the women athlete in Canadian advertising since 1950. The first, a print ad from 1950 features Barbara Ann Scott selling Timex watches. The second from 1970 shows Nancy Greene for Jergen’s skin lotion. Finally, I will discuss two more recent ads: a 1992 IBM television ad featuring Silken Laumann and a 2002 Cheerios cereal box featuring Catriona LeMay Doan. What makes these four athletes particularly appropriate to my study is their high profiles during the eras in which they were and are popular. Each ad dates within one or two years of the athlete’s greatest victory. This means that the women’s representation in an advertisement plays off of her

preexisting athletic accomplishment. Ads are social texts that both contribute to and make manifest the discourse on masculinity and femininity. Advertising’s “appeal to the consumer is indirect” (Millum 11). Instead, “advertising discourse is social communication in that it draws on an existing stock of images and knowledge and speaks to the consumer about the product by way of social message which will be readily understood” (Millum 11). I will argue that the interplay between the woman as athlete and the woman as a “readily understood” social message has resulted in an emphasis in the ads on the femininity of the athletes.

Varda Burstyn seeks to deconstruct all that appears to be apolitical and harmless about sport. Burstyn argues that sport is part of the system of social reproduction, and its structures “re-stratified along lines of gen-

der, colour, ethnicity, class, sexuality and physical ability” (107). Sport is particularly divided along gender lines, and men are the normative standard by which women’s sports are judged (Felshin 190). Sport is a system identified with male “self-actualization,” and participation of females has been seen as anomalous (Felshin 182). The identification of sport with masculinity means that the benefits and attributes accorded to athletes, such as teamwork, muscularity and sweat can be seen as anomalous to femininity.

Like Burstyn, Jan Felshin’s research is part of a body of work on the sociology of sport that considers its relationship to power structures. Felshin argues that as a consequence of the identification of sport with masculinity, woman athletes have tended to develop an “apologetic” to compensate for their participation. Felshin argues:

the apologetic suggests that the woman athlete can *appear* feminine ... *is* feminine, which has to do with sexual normality and attractiveness as well as so-called “lady-like” behaviour, and *wants* to be feminine, which means that social roles are valued more than sport roles, and life goals include marriage and motherhood rather than being a champion athlete. (204)

Notwithstanding the seriousness of her participation in sport, “the importance of femininity as a social assumption for women requires that those athletes who value social acceptance deny it [sport] and affirm that they are real women with feminine goals and interests” (Felshin 204). The “feminine apologetic” will be the theoretical concept applied to my deconstruction of three ads as social texts.

Femininity is a culturally sanctioned ideal of womanhood, but it is neither determinate nor unitary (Smith 37). Instead, femininity is contingent upon place and time and

it is “intelligible only in the context of the complex of which” [it] “is part” (Smith 37-38). The ideal woman of post-war Canada was thought by many to be embodied in the person of Barbara Ann Scott. Media stories about Scott, the 1948 European, World and Olympic women’s figure skating champion, exhaust themselves in their descriptions of the athlete. A 1948 *Time* magazine description extends to a paragraph:

Barbara Ann, with a peaches-and-cream complexion, saucer-size blue eyes and a rosebud mouth, is certainly pretty enough. Her light brown hair (golden now that she bleaches it) falls page-boy style on her shoulders. She weighs a trim, girlish 107 lbs., neither as full-bosomed as a Hollywood starlet nor as wide-hipped as most skaters. She looks, in fact, like a doll which is to be looked at but not touched. But Barbara Ann is no fragile mamet. She is the woman’s figure skating champion of the world. (“Ice Queen” 35)

This description notes that “Barbara Ann” is a champion, but after pouring over her appearance with exquisite attention to detail, does it matter that she is talented?

Figure skating, more than other sports, lends itself to the discourse on femininity. Abigail Feder argues that due to its “element of theatre, figure skating provides more opportunities for adornment and display, those familiar tropes of femininity with which the ... public is comfortable” (26). Barbara Ann SCOTT operated within this system and thus her participation in sport was not wholly transgressive. The headline of a post-war Timex ad reads “Like Men – Active Women Need a Rugged Watch.” This Timex Marlin watch advertisement features two photos of Barbara Ann Scott. The larger shows her in her figure skates, jumping into the air and smiling at the camera.

Why Mrs. Raine loves Jergens just as much as Nancy Greene does.

For more information, contact your local Jergens distributor. Write to Jergens, Inc., P.O. Box 100, New York, N.Y. 10001.

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The second photo is an image of the skater washing dishes, once again her head is turned toward the camera and she smiles out at the viewer. Scott's smile and gestures are rigid and banal. Ostensibly, Scott is engaged in other activities, yet her outward gaze connotes display. Scott is not doing the dishes or skating for herself; she is doing them for her viewer.

Erving Goffman argues that ads rely on "gestural internalization of what can be taken to be inner response" (27). In the Timex ad Scott's smile conveys her complicity and pleasure, with the roles she is accorded. The ad copy claims that the Timex Marlin is "Waterproof * Shock-Resistant * Dustproof" and that "throughout her busy, active day—at home or on the ice—Barbara Ann Scott uses and depends upon the Timex Sportster ... just as doctors, engineers, seamen, farmers—men in every walk of life..." (Milton and McCutcheon 22). The liberal and egalitarian tone of the ad belies its narrow prescription of the kinds of activities which are appropriate for men and women. The roles available to men are stated outright in the ad's copy. By contrast, women's roles are implied through the visual imagery. On one side stand Barbara Ann and other women (figure skaters, dish doers, smilers and watch wearers seem to be the potential activities the ad outlines). On the other side, of course, are the "doctors, engineers and seamen." Scott's representation in this ad belies the fact that she herself made an income on par with "doctors, engineers and seamen" and consequently it can be said to be consistent with any "typical" image of the 1950s housewife.

Even a potentially oppositional reading of an athlete's body can be transformed via advertising. Such is the case for women who participate in "non-traditional" sports, such as downhill skier Nancy Greene. Greene, whose name and face were used to sell such divergent products

as Jergens hand cream to Pontiac GM cars to Mars Bars. Following her 1967 and 1968 World and Olympic Championships for downhill skiing, Greene's manager Doug Maxwell told *Chatelaine* in 1970 that he was unsure she would be able to secure any endorsements because her "image lacked glamour" (MacDonald

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52). Maxwell attributes Greene's endorsement success to the athlete's ability to "win over" Canadians (MacDonald 54). While it may be true that Greene captured the imagination of Canadians, it does not discount the need marketers felt to normalize Greene's image. As John Berger argues, "publicity is not merely an assembly of competing messages: it is a language in itself which is always being used to make the same general proposal" (131). This proposal limits the transformational possibilities of women to that which they can purchase, display and improve in and for themselves.

Greene was featured in a 1970 Jergens ad that reads: "Why Mrs. Raine loves Jergens just as much as Nancy Greene does" (*Chatelaine* 8). The ad explains how both housewife Mrs. Raine and skier Nancy Greene love to use their Jergens brand hand lotion to keep their skin soft, revealing in the end that Nancy Greene *is* Mrs. Raine! (*Chatelaine* 8). Three

images of Greene are featured in the ad. The first and smallest features Greene posing holding her skis over her shoulders. The second shows Greene in a sun suit, rubbing Jergens's lotion into her skin. The third and largest shows Greene made up, in a dress (neither too casual, nor too fancy) and she seems to be arranging a bouquet of flowers, and smiling at the camera. Greene's presence in this ad, her gestures, clothes and props (flowers, lotion) are meant to connote femininity.

Femininity is written on to Greene's body in order to make her conform to the marketing message of Jergens lotion. First, by removing Greene from her skiwear, she becomes more recognizably feminine and most importantly, more like everyone else. Greene's body is of an acceptable size and type; however, by removing it from the context of skiing, her non-conformity is demystified and normalized. Second, by placing Greene in conventional front-facing poses her repertoire of athletic poses are excised and replaced by the more economic, controlled and contrived poses of advertising. Language also plays a part in feminizing the message of the Nancy Greene Jergens ad. Jergens lotion is said to keep Greene's "hands soft and smooth. Her complexion fresh and natural looking" (*Chatelaine* 8). No connection is made between the softness of Greene's skin and the swiftness with which she skied to the gold medal. There is no connection. Janice Winship argues that the placement of women's hands in advertising is key to the construction of femininity (26). Consequently, Greene no longer grasps her ski poles, but gently holds the skin lotion. Finally, Greene's body becomes an ornamental surface. She performs femininity by putting on a dress, posing for the camera and casually arranging some flowers. This final picture is reminiscent of the ideal housewife role Barbara Ann Scott performs in her Timex ad. While Greene's role as an athlete is not excised from these ads,

the photographs and text emphasize her conformity.

It is remarkable how similar the style of the Greene and Scott ads are. Each shows images of the athlete performing her sport, at the same time as performing more traditional feminine duties. A 1993 Silken Laumann ad for IBM personal computers shares with the Scott and Greene ads a focus on women's activities. Both Scott's and Greene's ads play on the duality of their roles. Scott is a skater and a housewife-figure and Greene is the skier/housewife. Laumann's challenge in the IBM ad takes a 'battle of the sexes' approach to addressing the athlete's unusual competence in sport. The television ad opens with Laumann and "Bill Meyer" standing side by side. Laumann is holding oars and Meyer is standing beside a computer. The voice over says "we've asked these experts to tell us which is easier: getting into a boat or using the IBM PS/1 personal computer ... we'll also ask them to trade places." Laumann and Meyer switch, Laumann sits down at the computer hesitantly and says "I don't know if I can do this very well..." while Meyer smiles and gives a thumbs up to the camera. A black screen appears with the words "five minutes later." Next, Meyer is falling in the water, struggling to even stand or sit on the boat, while Laumann is clicking away at the computer, looking up information on boating.

A number of possible interpretations of this battle of the sexes ad are possible. The most obvious is that using the PC is *easy*, much easier than rowing. Another interpretation is that rowing is hard, but Laumann is adept at both. The battle of the sexes interpretation shows the not-so-confident woman coming out on top, while the over-confident male makes a fool of himself. A pro-woman reading of the ad is possible, as it shows a woman working competently at a computer. It also depicts Laumann as an expert at sport and competent with machines, certainly a

step forward from the Barbara Ann Scott ad where Scott is competent at two things, skating and dishwashing.

A deconstruction of the ad does not necessarily have to be a negative reading of its depiction of women. However, an examination of the purpose of the ad shows that it relies on dominant ideas of what women

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are capable of. The ad is supposed to demonstrate that using a personal computer is easy, accessible for all ... even women! The dynamics of the ad would change if both of the "experts" were women. Would it be so funny for a woman not to be able to get into the boat? The humour of the ad is located in the sex difference between Laumann and Meyer. It may reverse traditional tropes of femininity by putting Laumann's expertise and ability on par with a "computer expert." However, it also relies on the viewers' prior knowledge of sex differences to be humorous. In addition to this, "Bill Meyer" is a caricature and an ineffectual opponent for Laumann. Even if Meyer were serious competition for Laumann, her expertise at the computer is accounted for via the ad's message, that using an IBM personal computer is easy.

What all three ads have in common is a preoccupation with the female athlete and her "expertise."

The three ads are putting the athletes' expertise to the test. The women are required to demonstrate their competency in other ways, and this directs attention away from their bodies and on to more common tropes of femininity, as well as onto the product. The use of a woman athlete as a spokesperson legitimizes her success, but at the same time, the ads constantly remind us that these athletes are "just" women. The Scott, Greene, and Laumann ads are three among several found to depict celebrity Canadian woman athletes. The ads selected for this paper compliment one another, but are by no means anomalous in comparison to other ads found. The feminine apologetic is the ubiquitous characteristic of the majority of ads featuring woman athletes.

While advertising changes with the times, there are limits to this change. An historical shift might be evident in a comparison between an ad for a Timex watch featuring Barbara Ann Scott from the 1950s and an ad for Chrysler cars featuring Catriona LeMay Doan in 2002. However, this kind of shift works within the closed system of representation of advertising, whereby "every publicity image confirms and enhances every other" (Berger 131). Janet Lee regards normative shifts within media representations of women as a recurring phenomenon. According to Lee, the "new woman" appears whenever someone has something new to sell to women—be it "clothes, careers or contraception" (168). Accordingly, women are "urged to change ... into the 'new woman' of the moment, by adopting whatever definition of liberation or modernity is current" (168). Lee's analysis allows us to see the connection between the shifts in advertising's use of the woman athlete and changes in the discourse of femininity. The woman athlete adds a tension to the discourse of advertising and becomes the "new woman" used to sell the latest product.

This qualitative overview of three

ads featuring Canadian woman athletes suggests that there has been no significant change in the "worldview" depicted in advertisements. At the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic games, Canadian women athletes "brought home" more medals than their male counterparts. Catriona LeMay Doan was Canada's first medallist, winning a gold in the woman's 500 m speed skating event. As LeMay Doan crossed the finish line, CBC announcer Brian Williams exclaimed that she had "won another gold medal for her husband." Advertisements featuring Scott, Greene, Laumann or LeMay Doan cannot be considered without an understanding of the milieu of which they are part. Thus, LeMay Doan's appearance in uniform on 2002 Cheerios boxes must be interrogated in its social context. On the one hand, this image foregrounds LeMay Doan the athlete. The speed skater is bent forward in racing position, in a unitard that covers her head. On the other hand, there are LeMay Doan's meticulously made-up cheek-bones and lips, along with the curious prominence of LeMay Doan's hands and, in particular, a prominent wedding band. The use of woman Olympians in advertisements may be a space for resistance to the feminine apologetic because of her dual role as an athlete and national symbol. However, the Cheerios ad indicates the limitations of the woman athlete as national symbol, given its place on the continuum of the feminine apologetic.

The Scott, Greene, Laumann and LeMay Doan ads are part of my larger study on the history of Canadian woman athletes in advertising. Factors such as the athlete's role as a national symbol need to be interrogated further. Moreover, my search for Canadian woman athletes in advertising has yielded only one ad featuring a woman of colour, Charmaine Crooks. Thus, race must be examined further in order to explain the absence of women of colour from advertising, and the role of racial (and other) barriers in Cana-

dian sporting institutions. Despite the limited parameters of this review, CAAWS' suggestion that women seek more funding or media coverage should be carefully considered. The mass media is not in the business of promoting social change. If other government funds and donations are not available to women, then corporate donations must be accepted only with the strictest guidelines. For example, corporations could contribute toward a fund for woman athletes, thereby avoiding the direction of the lion's share of the money to one celebrity athlete and limiting the placement of individuals in advertisements. As Latour suggests, a change in worldview means a change in the way that we represent things. An examination of advertisements between 1950 and 2002 illustrates that images of athletes continue to privilege the woman over the athlete.

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