

Deconstructing Representations of Race and Gender in Amazon's *Alexa Loses Her Voice*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the Super Bowl LII's most popular advertisement *Alexa Loses Her Voice*. The advertisement shows many white or light-skinned actors voicing Alexa. This advertisement plays into sexualization in media, beauty ideals, social identities, and it fits and promotes many stereotypes that have been portrayed in the media for years. In order to explore these issues, the investigator employed rhetorical analysis techniques guided by critical theory lenses including critical race theory and feminism. Among the author's findings are evidence of women being sexualized in the advertisement, a false idea of beauty being portrayed, and the presence of common race-related stereotypes.

Keywords

marketing, sexualization, social identities, stereotypes, sexualization in media, race-related stereotypes, false idea of beauty

Considering the hours of media attention and the tens of millions of online views they generate, it's safe to say that many people are just as interested in the advertisements as they are in the actual game. Among the many media organizations that rate the relative popularity and/or creative quality of Super Bowl ads is *USA Today*, which has published scores from its Ad Meter—a survey the publication has described as “the foremost tracker of public opinion on Super Bowl ads”—for 30 years (Siegel, 2018, para. 1). The Ad Meter's highest-scoring advertisement for 2018's Super Bowl LII was *Alexa Loses Her Voice*, a 90-second spot for Amazon created by its advertising agency Lucky Generals. In this advertisement, Alexa—Amazon's in-home, online voice assistant appliance—“loses her voice,” which prompts the

company to hire a number of celebrities to voice Alexa, resulting in comedic responses to user queries.

Although advertisements such as this one are the most pervasive forms of mass communication, critical study of the connotative messages they contain remain understudied (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). This commercial's popularity, coupled with the Super Bowl's audience size and millions of online views of the ad, further justify the need for studies such as this one. Accordingly, this research aims to interrogate how ideas of gender and race were constructed in *Alexa Loses Her Voice* by employing a rhetorical analysis that is informed by both the feminist and critical race perspectives.

This work focuses primarily on how the featured celebrities—Cardi B., Gordon Ramsay, Rebel Wilson, and Anthony Hopkins—convey standards of appearance and behavior that represent gendered and racial stereotypes. As subsequent discussion details, stereotypes of oversexualization, false beauty ideals, aggression, and whiteness were used in order to communicate ideas of both race and gender.

Media Representation

Our social identities are shaped by the media. According to Brooks and Hébert (2006), “[h]ow individuals construct their social identities, how they come to understand what it means to be male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, Native American—even rural or urban—is shaped by commodified texts produced by media for audiences that are increasingly segmented by the social constructions of race and gender” (p. 297). By depicting a number of individuals in a variety of situations, *Alexa Loses Her Voice* communicates ideas about what it means to be male or female, white or dark skinned, and how people from each of these groups are expected to look and act.

Constructing Race

Racial stereotypes—the “automatic and exaggerated mental pictures that we hold about all members of a particular racial group” (Overcoming Racial Stereotypes, 2018, para. 1).

Belcalis Almanzar (known professionally as Cardi B.), a rapper and Internet celebrity of Dominican and Caribbean heritage who identifies as black (Gaynor, 2018), is the celebrity most prominently featured throughout the commercial. Brooks and Hébert (2006) remarked that light skin is seen as a standard of beauty. This may help explain why Almanzar—whose beauty is a bedrock of her fame—was selected to appear in the ad. The other celebrities in the ad are not widely considered beautiful and do not need to rely as heavily on appearance for their success, in part, because they are white.

Brooks and Hébert (2006) also noted that “Some theorists (Gurrero, 1993; Iverem, 1997; Manatu, 2003) contend that black women are portrayed only as sexual beings” (p. 300). In the ad Cardi B. is shown in sexually revealing clothes. Her dress is very short and very low cut. Also, in her lyrics when she says, “Look, I don’t dance now I make money moves say I don’t gotta dance I make money moves,” she is referring to when she was a stripper, which further sexualizes her.

Further, media representations of minorities often portray them as irresponsible (Horton, Price, & Brown, 1999, para. 2). In *Alexa Loses Her Voice*, Almanzar is depicted in a palatial bedroom with a shoe closet that appears to contain hundreds of pairs of shoes and seems to be staffed by a male assistant. This kind of conspicuous spending is widely considered irresponsible and unwise. Thus, depictions like this, which show minorities spending instead of saving, rely on racist stereotypes and contribute to issues of how minorities are perceived.

“Black English” is different, and many times a consonant is substituted, replaced, or deleted (History of African American English in the U.S.). In the ad Cardi B. says, “Dis guy wanna go to Mars. For wha? Dere’s not even oxygen dere!” There are multiple instances/examples of Cardi B. using “Black English”.

Conversely, Ramsay and Hopkins are constructed using cues of whiteness. Whiteness concerns “the privileges/power that people who appear ‘white’ receive, because they are not subjected to the racism faced by people of color and Indigenous people” (Mattimore, 2017, para. 1). Ramsay is criticizing a man for not knowing how to make a grilled cheese, and that makes him

seem to have power, it may also seem that he has a privilege because he finds it unbelievable that a man does not know how to make a grilled cheese. Hopkins is in a place of power at the end when he is asked to call Brandon, he says that Brandon is “a bit tied up”, but speaks in a powerful manner

Constructing Gender

Kilbourne (n.d.) posited that advertisements portray women “almost exclusively as housewives or sex objects” (para. 6). To be female, then, is frequently construed as being sexual and sexually available, according to Madison Avenue.

In the ad, both Rebel Wilson and Belcalis Almanzar are depicted as overtly sexual. When an Alexa user asks the appliance to “set the mood” Wilson, who is sitting in a bathtub, says, “Now setting the mood,” and goes on to talk about the user being in the bush and he is “so dirty. And so sweaty, because it’s hot in the bush.” As mentioned before Cardi B. is in sexually revealing clothing throughout the commercial.

In the ad, masculinity is depicted by communicating wealth, power, strength, and control. Both Ramsay and Hopkins are shown outside their respective homes, where they are able to survey all that they own, as opposed to Almanzar and Wilson, who are shown inside. Further, both homes are large and somewhat pretentious, projecting a sense of wealth.

Ramsay and Hopkins are fully clothed whereas Wilson is presumably naked and Almanzar wears only a short robe. This attire, or lack thereof, puts the women in a vulnerable, less powerful position than the male celebrities.

Ramsay uses aggressive language when asked for a recipe for a grilled cheese. He responds with, “Pathetic! You’re 32 years of age, and you don’t know how to make a grilled cheese sandwich. Its name is the recipe, you dumb f***!” This aggressive language communicates power. He is also exercising which shows strength. When Hopkins is asked to call Brandon he responds with, “I’m afraid Brandon is a little tied up.” This is in reference to his Hannibal Lecter character who kidnapped, killed, and cannibalized male victims showing dominance and control.

Discussion

Bandura (2001) remarked that “[T]elevised representations of social realities reflect ideological bents in their portrayal of human nature, social relations, and the norms and structure of society. Heavy exposure to this symbolic world may eventually make the televised images appear to be the authentic state of human affairs” (p. 281). What emerges from an analysis of *Alexa Loses Her Voice* is a symbolic world that reinforces negative, narrow stereotypes of both race and gender. And because an average American is exposed to thousands of ads each day, the cumulative effects of that barrage of stereotypes is potentially harmful when individuals perceive them as authentic.

On the issue of representing race, this ad reaffirms that black women can be beautiful, so long as they have light skin, which has long been the standard for beauty. Cardi B., a light skinned black woman who embodies other ideals of beauty—including thinness and having straight hair—was chosen to represent minorities in this ad because she more closely resembles standards of whiteness than blackness. Swinson (2011) noted that such idealized images can be harmful and that they have “permeated every level of our visual culture” (para. 6). By failing to be more inclusive and choosing to promote existing stereotypes, the Alexa advertisement is no different.

Another potentially problematic set of media representations concerns the sexualization of women. Women are continually sexualized in advertisements, and they have been sexualized in the mass media since the inception of the printing press. Richards (2017) reported that “[b]etween 2006 and 2016 women were shown in sexually revealing clothing six times more than men. In 2017 that dropped from six times to five times, but the number of female characters shown in sexual revealing clothing overall remained the same (one in 10) (para. 9).” Even if it is slightly better now for women in media, it does not seem that sexualization of women in media will go away any time soon. In this advertisement when Rebel Wilson is having a sexual conversation while naked in a bathtub and Cardi B. is shown in revealing clothing, both of them are being sexualized.

With regard to sexualization of women in the media, Petter (2017) wrote that “Anything goes...Look at any of the top 10 Instagrammers-all you see is sexualized unattainable photoshopped images of sultry pouting teenagers with heaving cleavages and bare bottoms (para. 10). Cardi B. seems to perfectly fit this criticism, and though she should not be shamed for the way she looks, it is incredibly problematic that women rarely see other body types in ads. Most troubling, perhaps, is a media system that tells girls and women that the way they look is what matters most while simultaneously showing images of unattainable beauty.

Gender stereotypes are pervasive throughout the mass media, and especially in advertisements. As discussed, *Alexa Loses Her Voice* relied heavily on the women as sex objects stereotype. The sex object stereotype is, “the ultimate in one-dimensional desirability” (Kemp, 2017, para. 8), which portrays women as objects to be acted upon instead of as human beings with individual needs, feelings, and agency. Sexual assault and sexual harassment have been happening more often. As the media keeps portraying women as objects to be acted upon, it encourages gender equality. It also communicates that it is okay to sexually assault and harass women.

Earp and Katz (1999) argued that “Mainstream media representations play a role in reinforcing ideas about what it means to be a ‘real’ man in our society. In most media portrayals, male characters are rewarded for self-control and the control of others, aggression and violence, financial independence, and physical desirability.” By portraying successful men as verbally abusive, wealthy, and controlling, *Alexa Loses Her Voice* contributes to what some scholars now refer to as “toxic masculinity,” a destructive set of attitudes and behaviors that chastises men for appearing weak, emotional, or caring.

Even though this ad featured an equal number of female and male characters who received equal screen time, this ad should not be commended for equality. Indeed, the male characters were shown fully clothed while the female characters were in various degrees of undress. Further, the female celebrities were both shown inside of their homes, with audiences entering

private spaces—a bedroom and a bathroom—effectively giving the viewing audience the power of voyeurism over them. The act of selecting a celebrity of color and using the same number of female and male main characters, then, was little more than overt tokenism from a company that should be leading instead of perpetuating, especially considering how much spending power women control in its industry.

Conclusion

Alexa Loses Her Voice was the most popular advertisement for Super Bowl LLI. Though entertaining, the commercial relied heavily on a number of pervasive, potentially harmful stereotypes to represent both race and gender. A rhetorical analysis of the ad found evidence of whiteness as a standard for beauty, the sexualization of women, and toxic masculinity, among other tropes.

Advertisers continue to employ these damaging stereotypes because doing so makes it easier to communicate sales messages and audiences continue to reward them for doing so by favoriting their ads and purchasing their products. As minority and traditionally disadvantaged population segments continue to grow and gain more social and economic power, one can only hope that these outmoded representations are finally cast aside for more realistic, inclusive, and constructive ones.

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