Progressive Women’s Advertising Campaign
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Advertising campaigns are ubiquitous that continuously evolve over time. While the nature of advertising has changed, so have various gender roles in the ways in which men and women are depicted. Progressive Insurance Company offers a range of insurance services including auto, homeowners, renters, motorcycle, boat, RV, commercial auto, life, and health. Progressive has become increasingly popular with the help of their spokeswomen, Flo, whom has been highlighted in a serious of advertisements in the past few years. In a series of more than 100 TV commercials starring Flo, she has been portrayed riding motorcycles, sitting in a fishing boat, even being flirted with. In an article titled, “Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring female Sexual Agency in Contemporary advertising”, research suggests that recently, instead of being portrayed as passive objects of male gaze, young women in advertisements are more frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful (Gill, 2008). Flo can be seen as an example of this new stereotype seen in contemporary advertisements.

Although Flo represents a humoristic tone, further research has shown that the way women and men are stereotyped in advertising is dependent on humor. More often than not traditional male stereotypes are more prevalent in humorous ads while traditional female stereotypes are more prevalent in non-humorous ads (Eisend et. al, 2014). Flo is the opposite of this stereotype which Progressive has been quite successful with. Research also suggests that humor in advertising influences women greater than men.

In the past, women have been objectified as sexual objects in advertisements. Feminist theory focuses on exploitation of women in a patriarchy society. Feminists focus on the progression of women in advertisements rather than the negative stereotypes. Flo represents how women can be independent and empowering. This paper further
investigates how women are represented and utilized in contemporary advertising campaigns. More specifically, it will highlight Flo’s role in contemporary advertising and how feminine theory supports the progression of gender role stereotypes.
HISTORY OF PROGRESSIVE
Progressive insurance was established in 1937 by two lawyers named Joseph Lewis and Jack Green. They wanted to provide vehicle owners with security and protection, and thought an insurance company would be a good business investment. According to the article by Dylan McCaugherty, “Progressive is known for many first in the industry. They were the first to offer drive in claims, installation payments and premiums, and comparative quotes via their website” (Progressive Auto Insurance, 2015). By the year 1951, progressive was experiencing substantial growth and expanded into larger offices in Cleveland. They continued their growth and expansion which had then led them more towards the formation of the progressive corporation in the 1960s (Progressive Auto Insurance, 2015).

The prices that progressive share comes from a sense of fairness. Every insurance business deal with the competiveness of other corporations however Progressive insurance has a policy where they strive to price their policies as accurately and as competitive as possible. The rates are based on past claims experience and information about the customer, the customers vehicle and driving history. Progressive uses information about you that they then know help them to better understand the customer’s chances of being involved in a future accident. Their motto in customer satisfaction when it comes to customer picking their insurance over another is shop around for the combination of price and service that fits your needs. In doing so, the customer has options when it comes to shopping for car insurance such as online or by phone with a local independent insurance agent (Progressive Auto Insurance, 2015).
FEMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING
Almost everywhere you look you see sexism in television advertisements, none more controversial than the use of women. In the past, women were given less rights than men, and while this unbalance began to balance out; a movement was born out of the necessity to change. This movement is known as feminism and took place in the 1960s. “Feminism is the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men” (Merriam, 2015). When this movement first took off, it gained the support of women all over and continues to do so.

Today, feminism plays a role in the way television, magazines and other media outlets portray woman. Change occurred because feminists in the past noticed that the image of women was a misrepresentation and that there could be portrayed in a better way. “Feminist researchers stated that the media created women’s roles such as wife, mother and housekeeper for men; as a sex object used to sell products to men and/or a person trying to be beautiful for men”(Zoonen, 1994). Though this is seemingly true, most women felt that this should be changed, thus spurred the feminist movement.

Though some theorists see feminism as a discussion of exploitations and degradations, others view feminism as progression. Since women were always given fewer rights; the women who have his view; understand that the use of women in advertising is ultimately a step in the right direction. “There has been a significant shift in advertising representations of women in recent years, such that rather than being presented as passive objects of the male gaze, young women in adverts are now frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful” (Gill, 2008). This perspective understands that there is more to women in advertising rather than focusing on the negative stereotypes. For Example; the use of FLO in the progressive campaign; FLO has always been marketed as
a good spokesperson and has never had to be compromised with selling sex. These styles of ads tend to be more appealing and empowering to women and are becoming more prevalent today. Though feminism in advertising has been under scrutiny and the topic of much debate; women empowerment in advertising campaigns have proven to be very lucrative for companies. Considering that women’s spending power continues to increase, businesses benefit while generating more advertisements that appeal to women. “The proof is in the pudding: when Nike reported in September a fifteen percent gain in quarterly revenues, its biggest upswing in a year, its CEO Mark Parker credited the company’s efforts to cater to its female customers as one of the most significant drivers of growth”(Davidson, 2015). Nike being just one of many companies maximizing their profits this way. This can attest to feminist activity taking place in and around the brand. Women are very knowledgeable and hold high positions in these large companies. They are able to make, implement and understand decisions with feminism in mind.

Women empowerment in advertising has become so revolutionary that the term “femvertising” was coined. A lady named Samantha Skey, who the Huffington post refers to as the “Chief Revenue Officer of She Knows”, developed this term (Bahadur, 2014). Today, there are ads being released by companies that celebrate women rather than make them objects, ads that uplift women and celebrate their determinism and accomplishments. These ads positively reinforcing women have been proven to be effective for women’s self-esteem and will continue to be released. Ultimately, advertising has an impact on the way we view race, social class, gender and many more demographics. Since feminism has become influential towards gender roles in advertising, the image of women in advertising has been transformed to an image of women with power and independence. Feminism in
advertising will continue to define new and more versatile roles for women that are widely accepted as it continues to evolve in the future.
HISTORY OF PROGRESSIVE ADVERTISING
The Superstore Campaign

The Superstore campaign debut occurred in 2008, but it was improv that had made Flo famous. The initial goal of the Superstore campaign was to make shopping for insurance a pleasant experience. The superstore was a clean, open market where insurance was shoppable and sales people, like Flo, offered help. The role of the superstore was to make the intangible, tangible (Rodriguez, 2014). The campaign has evolved around the concept of the superstore, Flo, and additional characters to extend the story line. Flo is considered a pop culture icon with 4.2 million “likes” on face book and had a bestselling Halloween costume. In 2011, Flo joined the Jolly Green Giant and Mr. Peanut on the Advertising Week’s Madison Avenue Walk of Fame. (Strauss, 2012).

In 2010, Jeff Charney joined the Progressive team as Chief Marketing Officer, from Aflac. During this period of time, Progressive also developed an in-house media team to connect the brand to more channels. In 2013, the company spent $587 million on advertising, which increases 17% from the previous year. Progressive is the 70th largest advertiser. Jeff Charney said, “We buy our media inside the company, which makes me, as a network executive really strong. I have hundreds of channels to put my content in the right context.” With the network strategy, revenue from the Superstore campaign grew from $18.2 billion in revenues in 2013, which is up 15% in 2011 (Rodriguez, 2014).

In the 100th ad of the Superstore campaign, the audience meets Flo’s bickering family. This commercial had Flo’s character, Stephanie Courtney, playing all the roles. She acted alongside metal poles that were later digitally edited to show all 6 characters at once. Stephanie Courtney plays the mother, father, brother, sister, grandfather, and Flo. This
specific commercial was meant to build a deeper connection to the character, showcase a relatable moment and show the campaign’s range.

Overall Flo embodies how Progressive wants to be presented. Flo is a passionate, caring sales clerk. The Progressive Company portrays these qualities through their commercials. The commercials show Flo as a “genuine listener”. When she asks a question, she waits for an answer, then she gives you a customized answer. The customized answer she gives you is a cost-saving insurance solution from progressive.

**Combating Flo-Fatigue**

Mr. Charney joined progressive in November 2010 from Aflac. This was about the time that people started to get tired of Flo. The company’s total earning growth slowed and gains from one percent from 3-2 from the previous year. Around this time the Progressive Company experimented with adding extra characters like the rivals, who are a pair of other insurance providers, and the messenger, who is a mustached hero. But changes were made to the Flo storyline. When Mr. Charney got there in 2010 he decided that it was time to bring Flo out of the superstore. The first commercial progressive did with Flo outside of the superstore was called “Best Day”, Flo went on a date. Mr. Charney stated, “The best day was our first wink that people crush a little bit on Flo. The best day gave that a little more edge and showed that we could change over time.” (Rodriguez, 2014) Starting to hint that people crushed on Flo allowed the company to make many more additions to Flo’s character that would make her more of a rounded character.

Mr. Charney liked television so much (that is why the company had an in house media team) he treated the superstore campaign as a television network and treated each commercial like a sitcom. This new approach to superstore campaign included flashbacks
to Flo’s youth, new cast members like Jamie, her sidekick, Pickles the dog, and a spin-off starring “The Box”. The newest compliant to the Superstore campaign is called “The Thread.” It is a compliant to the campaign because it plays off of Flo’s apron. What do aprons have to do with insurance? Flo wears one. This gave Progressive another avenue for the company to show different qualities and characteristics that the company possessed. In the new commercials the aprons are symbols for hard work, and taking pride in a job well done and progress (Champagne, 2013).

**Top 5 Flo ads**

This list of the top five Progressive advertisements based on customer responses, new prospects was taken from adage in an article called Flo’s Progressive Evolution written by Ashley Rodriguez.

1. The Heist: March 2014- The rivals break into the superstore and try to steal the name your price tool.

2. Empowered: January 2013- A customer feels so empowered after using the name your price tool, and getting a low insurance rate that he tries to juggle chain saw.

3. Peer Pressure: January 2013- Flo is talking to two potential customers about switching to Progressive. Flo makes a joke and says “Do you always do what they tell you?”


5. Secret Weapon: June 2013- Flo is selling insurance to the minions and then she reveals the secret weapon is a large name your price tool.
100th Advertisement Story Board

Flo is eating dinner with her mother, father, sister, brother, and grandfather. The mother starts it off by asking the sister what she has been up to, she responses blogging. The brother and sister bicker and Flo interjects with, “I have been saving people tons of money with discounts at Progressive!” The mother asks if Flo could get Janice, the sister, a job. The mother says I got a discount on the ham. The father responses, “I have the meat sweats!” The grandfather says, “This is good ham Diane.” Flo interjects again with more discounts that she got for her customers. The commercial raps up with everyone telling Flo to stop.
The success of Progressive’s series of advertising campaigns starring Flo has been substantial for their overall success and reputation. Women in advertising have historically been symbolized as objects of desire and commodities, rather than human beings. More specifically, women have been objectified as vulnerable and weak. Feminism takes a role in this by analyzing the experiences of women in a male-dominated society. As the nature of advertising changes so does the various gender roles and ways in which men and women are depicted. Gill points out that instead of being portrayed as passive objects of male gaze, young women in advertisements are more frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful (Gill, 2008).

Women empowerment in advertising has become so revolutionary that the term “Femvertising” was coined. While feminism has become influential towards gender roles in advertising, the image of women in advertising has been transformed to an image of women with power and independence. Progressive insurance company has executed this idea through their various campaigns featuring Flo.

Although Progressive has established Flo as an empowered woman, the evolution of their campaign has fostered a deeper relationship with Flow with more insight into her personal life. The 100th Advertisement Story Board invites audiences to meet Flo’s family, figuring that a closer connection to Flo poses for a greater chance of organizational identity among publics. Feminist theory focuses on the progression of women in advertisements rather than the negative stereotypes while Flo represents how women can be portrayed independent and empowering. CMO Jeff Charney has admitted that Flo started off as a hero, but recent efforts in advertising have focused on adding an ensemble in the form of rival insurance company employees in order to keep scenes fresh.
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