



**The representation of women in modern automotive advertising:
A case study of Ford Motor Company's portrayal of women in three recent
marketing campaigns.**

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MSc Marketing

January 2024/2025

Word count: 13,180

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Abstract

The representation of women in automotive advertising has historically reinforced gender stereotypes, often with accompanying sexist images and taglines, positioning the automotive industry as a male-dominated space. Despite increasing purchasing power and influence over car-buying decisions, women have long been excluded or misrepresented in car marketing narratives.

Using a qualitative case study methodology, this research analyses the portrayal of women in modern automotive advertising through a case study of three recent campaigns by Ford Motor Company, using a feminist and gender-focused marketing theoretical framework to assess their impact. A thematic analysis identifies both positives and negatives related to gender representation, feminist epistemologies and the equality of women within automotive.

The analysis reveals that while Ford's campaigns show progress in portraying women as knowledgeable and empowered figures within automotive, they also continue to reinforce gender stereotypes for both men and women. For example, the 'Mechanic' and 'Charge around the Globe' campaigns present women in traditionally masculine roles, continuing to limit access to the automotive industry. The 'Passenger Princess' campaign reinforces gender stereotypes through its focus on feminine accessories, imagery and other cues.

While Ford has capitalised on female protagonists within its campaigns, this research highlights the restrictions still placed on involving women within automotive, highlighting outdated stereotypes and power dynamics that should be addressed within future marketing strategies.

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to the girls – for me, and every woman fighting for equality within the automotive industry and beyond, especially my most supportive friends, Alex, Ellen, Helen, Imy, Jess, Laura, Lauren, Lucy, Lydia, Olivia and my brilliant supervisor, Dr. Wendy Hein.

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1. Introduction

The automotive industry has historically been recognised as male-dominated. From the advertising of the cars themselves, with such slogans as “so simple that even a woman can drive it” (Clarsen, 2008), to written automotive literature where women are absent from discussion (Sanford, 1983), or the difficulty of women being able to break into the car sales sector (Lawson, 2000), the industry is inherently known as being a man’s domain. Yet statistics show that in the US, women are responsible for 62 percent of all new cars sold and influence more than 85 percent of all car purchases (Newman, 2019). In the UK, women make up 48 percent of all drivers, but 62 percent of women surveyed by Carwow in 2023 felt that societal stereotypes about female drivers made the car-buying process less accessible (Griffiths, 2023). With such influential purchasing power, it makes sense for automotive marketing to be considerate of the female demographic. For many brands, the starting point for this journey comes through advertising and marketing campaigns.

1.1 Research background

The area of automotive advertising lives almost as a parody within marketing archives. In the 1910s, brands used print advertising to sell their cars based on technological facts and details, enhancing what the brand wanted to be known for instead of trying to target what the customer wanted from the car itself (Laird, 1996). Such print adverts talked about build quality, manufacturing and reliability. It was not until the 1930s that automotive advertising became less about convincing customers to buy a car, and more about convincing them *which* car to buy. Within the 1960s and 1970s, car adverts began to show notably sexist themes, with derogatory taglines and phrases used against women. Keeshin (2016) summarises a number of these, including a 1959 advert for the Volkswagen Beetle with the title: “Sooner or later, your wife will drive home one of the best reasons for owning a Volkswagen”, and a 1969 Ford Cortina advert that explains: “Before buying your wife a new

cross-flow Cortina, make her repeat after you: I WILL see the housework's done before dashing off to show the girls my new Cortina's chic interior colour scheme" (Keeshin, 2016).

Today, the expansive car market, range of marketing strategies and diverse demographic of buyers means automotive advertising covers more audiences than ever. Additionally, as recognition of inclusion and equality of society continues to grow, automotive brands are more aware of their need to target, represent and include women in their branding and messaging. Female-focused and gender-inclusive advertising are developing topics in the evolution of brand marketing strategies; Barletta (2003) discusses how women favour purchasing decisions that reflect on empathy rather than jealousy, and the need to feature "normal" rather than "aspiration" women in adverts. Additionally, over the past century, the evolution of feminism and research into feminist theories have contributed to women's place in society. Varghese and Kumar (2022) provide insight into modern, fourth-wave feminism and its role within modern marketing, especially around the concept of 'femvertising', where brands use female empowerment as a marketing technique. However, brands face criticism if they do not follow such messaging throughout their full business ethos (McCleary, 2014).

1.2 Research gap

While there is already extensive discussion on women's role within automotive, as well as analysis of historical sexist automotive adverts, there is a gap in the application of more modern theories within this genre, across both feminism and marketing in general. This research addresses that gap by focusing on automotive advertising as a specialised area of marketing, allowing for the application of theories such as gender representation, feminist epistemologies, female empowerment and marketing strategies including 'femvertising' (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). While these themes have already been explored across other areas of marketing, as highlighted within the upcoming literature review, their application within automotive is yet to be fully discussed.

Research in this area is particularly topical given the growing influence of female consumers in the automotive sector; today, 48 percent of drivers are women (Griffiths, 2023).

Additionally, advertising award bodies are beginning to recognise campaigns that offer new insights into diversity and inclusion, highlighting the importance of including such representation in marketing strategies (Zayer et al., 2023). Such diverse representations help play a role in contributing to a more inclusive society (Williams et al., 2004). As such, it is important to assess if and how these themes are prevalent in marketing strategies today.

This research aims to fill the gap by analysing recent campaigns from Ford Motor Company to explore how they portray women, whether they still perpetuate gender stereotypes and the extent to which modern consumer theories are reflected in the narratives. The existing historical analysis of car-focused campaigns provides a clear benchmark to see if modern advertising has progressed in developing these themes.

1.3 Research aim

This research aims to contribute to the broader fields of marketing, gender studies and feminist theory by examining how modern automotive campaigns portray the role of women and broader gender representation. It aims to explore how modern advertising aligns with or challenges existing research on gender roles and representation within this field of marketing.

By focusing on Ford Motor Company as a case study, this research contributes to the growing discussion on gendered advertising practices with focus on a traditionally male-dominated industry. The analysis looks at feminist marketing concepts, including 'femvertising', gender washing and material-discursive relationships, to offer insight on how gender-inclusive marketing should be represented in automotive and beyond.

1.4 Research questions

The project aims to present an answer to the questions of:

1. How do modern-day automotive advertisements portray women?
2. Which feminist theories or frameworks, if any, are reflected in these campaigns?
3. Do these campaigns resist or reinforce gender stereotypes, and to what extent?

This case study will look at three digital-first campaigns produced by Ford Motor Company that feature a female as the lead role or character. It will also consider additional PR success and consumer response. The purpose of this research is to further understand the context of these campaigns, applying modern theories and frameworks to discuss whether these adverts are presenting a more inclusive representation of women within automotive.

1.5 Contribution to practice

Having looked at many car adverts across the industry throughout this research, Ford Motor Company has produced multiple campaigns within the last two years that have featured women as a key part of the narrative. This makes Ford a noteworthy case study for discussion. By looking in detail at these campaigns, this research aims to discuss potential positives and developments presented, aligned with contemporary theories of gender, feminism and marketing. This will result in a number of discussion points and conclusions that may be replicated across other automotive manufacturers in order to develop more gender-inclusive marketing, better brand loyalty and ultimately more sales across the industry. Alternatively, it may continue to highlight gaps in practice and offer suggestions on how to provide better representation for women in 21st-century marketing.

2. Literature review

This chapter takes a detailed look at existing research surrounding the fields of marketing, automotive, gender and feminism, to outline the key theories and frameworks relevant for this research. This aims to create a theoretical framework and outline that can be used during the analysis stage of this research, guiding the overall conclusions on how Ford Motor Company represents women in its automotive campaigns.

2.1 Automotive advertising

This research follows a case study of advertisements from one automotive manufacturer, Ford Motor Company. This is due to both the availability of recent campaigns that can be used for analysis, but also the brand's place within existing academic research across a multitude of industries and topics. From historical accounts of the automotive brand's developments (Brinkley, 2004), to psychological analysis of Ford car buyers (Evans, 1959), to hailing Henry Ford as "the father of mass production" within engineering (Alizon et al., 2008), the brand has long been recognised as an integral company in the development of all business avenues throughout the last 100 years. How Ford developed itself within car marketing specifically also offers a clear avenue of development; in the 1920s, Henry Ford was still focusing on making car advertisements about mechanics, economics and production (Laird, 1996). His brand's automotive print adverts from that time presented technical discussions about the products, with detailed copy outlining the car's benefits and answering people's uncertainties about the evolution of the car. Henry Ford insisted that his advertisements "not make the pleasure [of driving] the principle", regardless of what was happening elsewhere in consumer culture of the time (Laird, 1996, p.805). Research from 1959 questioned how customers favoured the Ford brand over other American alternatives including Chevrolet (Evans, 1959). Evans quoted Henry G. Baker, an employee at Ford, saying: "a make thus becomes a very real extension of the owner's desired personality," with

his colleague David Wallace commenting “Ford is perceived as being the most masculine of the low-priced makes. Chevrolet and Plymouth are more feminine” (ibid., p.343).

One Ford magazine advertisement from the time showed the Highland Park manufacturing plant, highlighting the brand’s focus on technological excellence with an emphasis on large-scale production and low prices (Figure 1). Laird (ibid., p.803) discusses how Henry Ford’s “production-centered ethos [was] so unwavering, he almost drove his company to ruin by continuing to build economical machines and to advertise them as just that.”

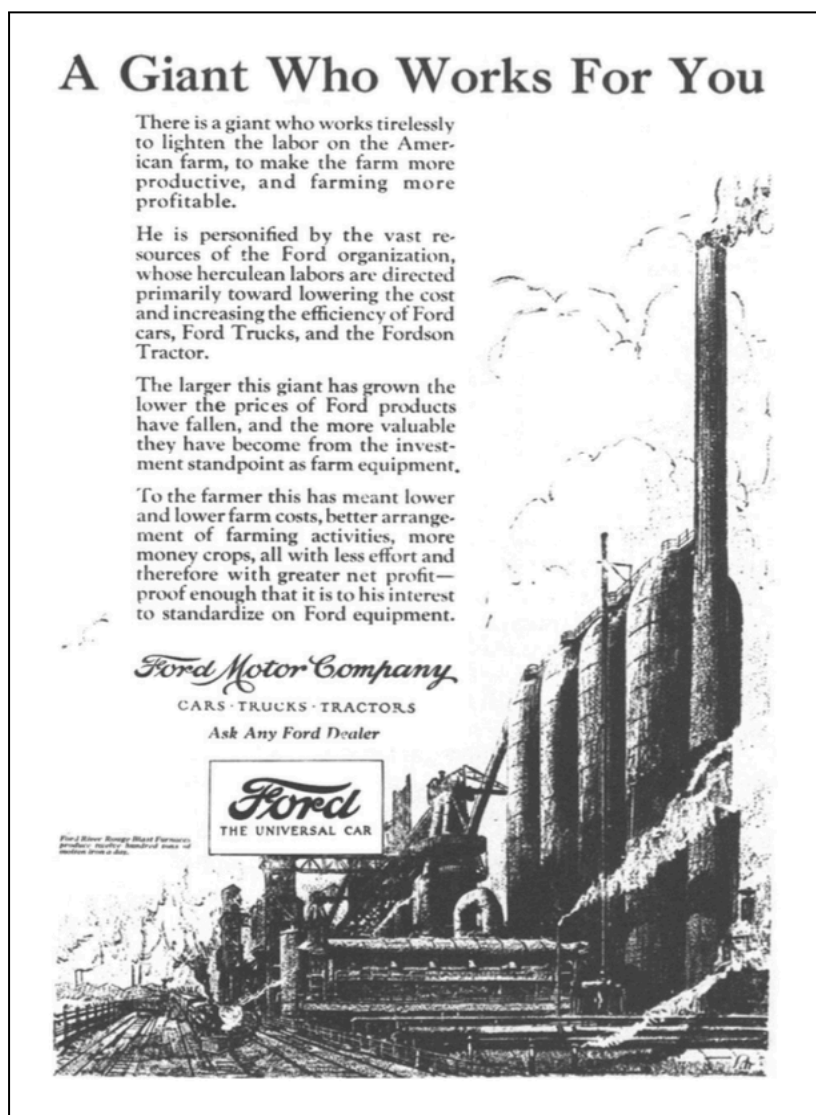


Figure 1. “A Giant Who Works For You,” Ford Motor Company. (From the Collections of the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, neg. No 64.167.19.417.) In Laird, P.W. (1996). ‘The Car Without a Single Weakness’: Early Automobile Advertising. *Technology and Culture*, [online] 37(4), p.796. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/3107098>.

Despite Ford's desire to focus on the technological capabilities of its car, other automotive brands were looking at different marketing propositions as far back as the 1920s. Brands were aware that car marketing was no longer a matter of convincing people to buy a car, but to buy one car over another. Edward S. Jordan, an entrepreneur and founder of Jordan Motor Car Company, was one of the first to venture into new strategies of automotive marketing, with his ground-breaking 1923 advertisements in the *Saturday Evening Post* setting "a new pace for the field, with dynamic images and copy about power, speed, and fun for a car purportedly designed for lively, youthful adventurers" (Laird, 1996, p.808); there was no mention of price or engine size. Leiss et al (1986) identified four 'cultural frames for goods', which follow this industrial development throughout the 20th century; in the early 1900s, advertising focused on the usefulness of products and its price to consumers. Between 1925 and 1945, adverts reflected more non-rational product properties, with 'magical' features that allowed the customer to aspire to a certain way of living. By the 1950s, advertising saw a change of emphasis towards consumers considering what a product could do for them, with an increase in emotion being used across marketing campaigns.

From 1965 onwards, there was a further shift towards 'totemism', linking physical goods to the idea of a lifestyle group or "clans" (Leiss et al., 1986, p.16). In 1965 specifically, American car manufacturers spent \$493 million in media advertising (Gerl and Davis, 2013). By the 1970s and 1980s, advertising had become more about 'the propaganda of commodities' (Lasch, 1979), whereby advertising focused less on the products themselves and more on consumption as a way of life and what a certain car could offer. Evans (1959) discussed how many purchase decisions follow Freudian schools of psychology, with a deep root in personality and unconscious motives, more so than just facts and figures. The focus of advertising shifted towards the persona of the owner, suggesting indications of wealth and substance (Stokes and Hallett, 1992); Marsh and Collett (1987, p.25) described the car as becoming "the most psychologically expressive object that has so far been devised".

2.1.1 Sexism in automotive advertising

Throughout this time, automotive marketing suffered issues in terms of gender equality, prominent right through to the end of the 20th century; Virginia Scharff documented that “the tendency to trivialize women’s driving remains strong among Americans, and continues not only to denigrate women but also to inhibit the creative possibilities of the car culture” (Scharff, 1991, p.173). In examples of early marketing, cars for women were promoted as “the perfect vehicle for carrying kids and cargo” (Lezotte, 2012, p.516). The role of the motorcar within a women’s realm remained as a reinforcement of gendered roles as a wife and mother. Research and discussion around the development of female-focused advertising in automotive often includes an array of perceived sexist print adverts from within this period. Motoring outlet The Drive curated a selection of historical adverts, including a print ad for the Volkswagen Beetle from 1959 with the headline “Sooner or later, your wife will drive home one of the best reasons for owning a Volkswagen” (Keeshin, 2016), implying that the safety of the Volkswagen while a woman was driving it is what made it stand out. Additionally, a Ford Cortina advert from 1969 opened with: “Before buying your wife a new cross-flow Cortina, make her repeat after you: I WILL see the housework’s done before dashing off to show the girls my new Cortina’s chic interior colour scheme.” (Figure 2). Advertising professional Paula Green started her work in the industry in the 1950s, commenting that “no women were allowed to work on automotive [...] because men figured we didn’t know how to drive so we couldn’t possibly write automobile advertising” (in Tunc and Babic, 2021, p.427). Green became known for her work for the car-hire brand Avis, before going on to become president of her own advertising firm.



Figure 2. "I Will Die With Mop in Hand" (Ford, 1969). In Keeshin, B. (2016). 7 Sexist Car Ads That Show We've Made Some Progress. [online] The Drive. Available at: <https://www.thedrive.com/vintage/250/7-sexist-car-ads-that-show-weve-made-some-progress>.

Lezotte, another former automotive advertising professional, spoke of her time working for the advertising agency McCann in Detroit starting in the mid 1970s. She stood out amongst an industry of almost exclusively men, despite the women's movement of the era seeking to challenge these hiring stereotypes (Lezotte, 2021). In the 1980s, she was tasked with creating a female-focused campaign for one of Ford's main competitors, General Motors:

"I was assigned the Regal, which had been designated by General Motors as the "woman's car." This classification was not due to its popularity among female consumers nor to any "female friendly" automotive features. Rather, it was because sales figures for the outdated Regal were dropping. [...] Traditionally, automakers have attempted to market unpopular cars to women when "authentic" automobile aficionados – male drivers – would no longer buy them." (Lezotte, 2021, p.9).

The Regal campaign went on to play on female stereotypes; the copy subverted the notion of women only being beautiful on the outside, with the tagline of “Good looking outside. Good thinking inside.” (Figure 3). Other female-focused automotive marketing from that time portrayed practical elements of cars, suggesting that for women, driving is more about duties than enjoyment; women were not encouraged to take pleasure in the driving experience as this would be deemed to infringe on male territory and threaten supposed masculine identity (Lezotte, 2012).



**Good looking outside.
Good thinking inside.**

1983 Buick Regal.

Some people assume that someone, or something, that's got a lot in the good looks department, may be lacking in the good thinking department. Lest you have the same misconception about the Buick Regal, here are some things to consider.

We certainly agree that the Regal is strikingly beautiful. But it's got more going for it than that. For instance, there's a 3.8 liter V-6 engine that gives a lot of power, yet has a lot of willpower when it comes to conserving on gasoline consumption.

EST. HWY. 30	EPA EST. MPG 21
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Regal's interior not only looks rich and luxurious, but it's intelligently designed. So there's plenty of room for five. And, of course, there's plenty of trunk space, too.

So go see the 1983 Regal at your Buick dealer's now. You'll find that a lot of good thinking went inside of the Regal's good looking outside. And remember to show your good thinking by buckling up your seat belt.

Use estimated MPG for comparison. Your mileage may differ depending on speed, distance, weather. Actual highway mileage lower. Estimates lower in California. Some Buicks are equipped with engines produced by other GM divisions, subsidiaries, or affiliated companies worldwide. See your Buick dealer for details.

Official Car of the XXIIIrd Olympiad
Los Angeles 1984



Figure 3. Buick Regal advertisement: “Good looking outside. Good thinking inside.” (National Geographic, April 1983.) In Lezotte, C. (2021). “McCann & Me: One Woman’s Experience in Detroit Automotive Advertising.” *Automotive History Review* 62 (Spring 2021): 4-16.

In an attempt to attract automotive advertising spend within more diverse publications, some female-focused magazines began including car-specific content to expand their reach. Journalist Julie Candler started writing a regular column, “Woman at the Wheel”, in the magazine *Woman’s Day* in 1964 that ran for more than 18 years. Looking at nearly 190 examples of the column, the key themes discussed were safety, car repairs and maintenance, and advice on buying a new or used car (Gerl and Davis, 2013). Only one column in the publication’s history talked about the car’s style features, going against the stereotype of the time that women only cared about appearance; a 1935 Ford V-8 advert emphasised style and attractiveness, reflecting “a concept that endured for years that men chose the car, women the color and upholstery” (ibid., p.215).

Despite the automotive content created to encourage discussion and interest in cars throughout the women’s sector, *Woman’s Day* failed to attract any advertising in its magazine. Gerl and Davis conclude that this direction was ultimately led by the corporate advertising budget, which “faced immense pressure from local, male-owned dealerships to keep the cars’ images squarely in front of men through television and auto publications.” (2013, p. 217).

2.2 Women in automotive

Throughout the last century, cars have mostly been identified with masculinity and mobility, with women’s access and ability to drive being disputed across multiple avenues (Scharff, 1991). Equality issues for women within the automotive industry span many avenues. This is despite the fact that women have been driving in significant numbers since the widespread introduction of the car; for example, the Ladies Automobile Club of Great Britain was founded in 1903 (Lees-Maffei, 2002). In 1933, women held 12 percent of driving licences and by 1993, nearly half of all driving licences were held by women, with more than a third of women owning their own cars (Jackson, 1993). Automotive knowledge, and access to it, had

been established as 'male property'; Clarsen suggests that "men quickly claimed automobiles as a prized masculine technology and presumed to define the terms under which they should be adopted into social life" (Clarsen, 2008, p.2). This allowed car makers and brands to establish themselves as a socially distinct and superior group of 'ideal knowers' (Harding, 1993). Automotive research and decision making is also claimed to be more complex for women due to the nature of mental and social processes; not only are they researching for themselves, but also with awareness of the reaction and needs of other people within the family (Zatwarnicka-Madura, 2016).

Limiting women's access and involvement in such knowledge has allowed the industry to maintain its power over the female consumer (Lezotte, 2014). This plays into theories of feminist epistemology, explored by Harding (1993), Nelson (1993), and Alcoff and Potter (1993). It suggests that the politics of knowledge, the impact of social status and the gender of the knower contribute to the production of knowledge. They discuss that it is communities, rather than individuals, that produce knowledge. Lezotte (2014) discusses the creation of online spaces such as women's car advice websites and communities, allowing them to serve as locations for the creation, accumulation and distribution of women's automotive knowledge (Longino, 1993). For example, specialist automotive website *AskPatty* relies on over fifty female automotive experts to provide advice and answer questions to female readers; this shared epistemological community helps communicate automotive knowledge between genders, reconfiguring masculine traditions of the industry (Harding, 1993; Nelson, 1993). Franz (2005) also discussed how the niche avenue of call-in radio programmes presented a way for women to discuss cars with male counterparts, highlighting the idea of automotive knowledge being tied to authority; the National Public Radio show *Car Talk* offered live mechanical and other automotive advice to men and women calling in. The hosts, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, used their platform to highlight the differences between men and women in response to driving and car maintenance, saying "women are better at

describing problems, better at answering questions [...] and, in general, have less of their egos tied up in pretending that they know everything” (Franz, 2005, p.164).

2.2.1 The ‘Chick Car’

In the 2000s, a new genre of automotive products appeared on the market with an aim to attract more female buyers; women began to stake their claim over the so-called “chick car”. This concept of automotive represented freedom, independence, agency and, for the first time, fun for a woman driver (Lezotte, 2012). These were the antithesis of traditional domestic cars; a 1978 Honda Civic advert described it as “the car we designed around a shopping bag” (Figure 4). Instead, this type of car acted as a declaration of independence from their domestic role and financial independence from parents, with primary buyers often being young single women without children (ibid.). They also gave access to a wider social life and offered new possibilities for female independence (Scharff, 1991). This was an important part of women’s contribution to automotive culture. Yet reviews and validation of “chick cars” still depended on input of male journalists. Levin (2006) described the MINI Cooper by giving it praise from his friend who is “a former jock [...] and drives a big pickup”; the only way these cars gained credibility remained through male approval.

While manufacturers were reluctant to prove their allegiances with women through their advertising, the impact of this segment on the market was not going unnoticed. In 1967, statistics showed only 13.3 percent of women drivers were involved in a car accident, compared with 23.5 percent of male drivers (Candler, 1967). By 1971, car dealers were beginning to adapt their showrooms to help appeal to a female audience, including hiring female staff; another manager admitted to adapting the seat height in smaller models to accommodate women’s high heels and short skirts (Gerl and Davis, 2013). More recently, research by car sales brand Carwow in 2023 revealed that women make up 48 percent of motorists within the UK, yet if there were only female drivers on the road, there would be a

63 percent reduction in motoring offences, 59 percent reduction in drink-driving and 91 percent reduction in dangerous driving on the roads (Griffiths, 2023). Griffiths concludes that “the theme that continues to emerge is that women are far, far safer behind the wheel than men. It must be the responsibility of men to ask themselves what they can do to improve their performance in this area” (ibid.).

The Honda Civic. The car we designed around a shopping bag.



It's true. We had supermarket shopping bags flown to our factory when we designed the Honda Civic® Hatchbacks. Measuring the bags helped us determine the size of the rear cargo area.

This may seem like a lot of fuss over a small detail. But at Honda we do everything that way. For all its simplicity, the Honda Civic has been planned with meticulous care.

So you see? It's not by accident that four full-sized shopping bags fit inside our hatch.

Of course, four also happens to be the number of full-sized people that fit inside our Civic's passenger compartment. And if we went to all that trouble to make a shopping bag comfortable, just imagine what we must have done to make you comfortable.

HONDA
We make it simple.



© 1978 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

Figure 4. Honda advertisement: “The Honda Civic. The car we designed around the shopping bag” (1978). Copyright American Honda Motor Co., Inc. In Lezotte, C. (2012). The Evolution of the ‘Chick Car’ Or: What Came First, the Chick or the Car?. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 45(3), pp.516–531. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2012.00942.x>.

2.3 Gender in marketing

Marketing has been used as a tool to reinforce and enhance gendered roles through the perception and portrayal of gender itself. Gender is not assigned at birth, but instead, performed through situated, symbolic interactions and social cues (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Social gender displays can reinforce or resist conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Lorber, 1994). Avery (2012) discusses how brands build and portray a gender of their own, with customers more likely to choose possessions and activities that reflect their gender identity. During the early period of developing automotive marketing, discussion on the role of men suggested that the rules of manhood were to not be like a woman; supposed real men “must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics” (Brannon, 1976, p.14). As such, suggesting or promoting a brand to have feminine characteristics is detrimental to consumption; women are more likely to purchase a masculine product than men are to associate with more feminine brands (Avery, 2012).

This can be interpreted through the idea of power dynamics, with Penalzoza (1994, p.336) discussing how men venturing into the feminine domain “is to willingly pursue its stigma and downward mobility”, going against male privilege and male dominated cultures. Bowden and Mummery (2009) discuss the role of women in advertising through the use of the ‘public’ and ‘private’ sphere. The public sphere is where economic production and political decision making occur, for example the financial decision of purchasing a car, and is represented as being male orientated. The private sphere is associated with domestic personal and family life, traditionally associated with femininity. The literature argues that it is not enough to simply have women’s acceptance in the public sphere, but instead, men must have an equal role in the private sphere. This means it is not just about showing women driving cars, but showing men fulfilling more feminine, domestic roles, too.

This recognition has led advertising regulatory bodies to now provide guidance to advertisers on how to create progressive and inclusive portrayals of gender within campaigns (Antoniou and Akrivos, 2020). There is increasing acknowledgement of diversity within advertising as a whole, with research referencing the portrayal of people across a spectrum of race, gender, age, sexual orientation and more (Zayer et al., 2023). The acknowledgement of diverse representations in advertising helps contribute to a more representative and inclusive society (Williams et al., 2004). Today, many advertising award bodies now offer specific categories to recognise work that directly contributes to advancing representation of gender equality (Zayer et al., 2023). Advertising awards have already been recognised within research as crucial to the success and legitimacy of a brand within the industry, contributing to credible external validity (West et al., 2019).

2.3.1 Objectification theory in advertising

Objectification theory is also present in many modern adverts and marketing campaigns. As outlined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), this can be seen in commercials where a woman's body is separated from herself as a person (see also Szymanski et. al, 2011). In the same framework, they discuss how an objectifying gaze occurs in media that shows interpersonal and social encounters. For example, analysis of adverts has shown that men are pictured looking directly at a female partner far more often than the other way around. Goffman (1987) explores further, describing the 'anchored drift'; a common theme where a male is depicted staring at a female who is daydreaming or drifting from the scene, for example while sitting in the submissive passenger seat of a vehicle. Women have been historically represented as submissive or decorative, with an overreliance on domestic and family contexts used to enhance gender inequalities (Grau and Zotos, 2016). Sexism in advertising is now widely recognised as a global issue to be addressed (Gurrieri and Hoffman, 2019).

Additionally, there is growing research on the consumer differences between men and women, and how brands can capitalise on that in their sales techniques. For example, Barletta (2003) discusses the 'Gender Trends Marketing Model', which proposes the idea of 'warmer instead of winner', selling concepts of bringing people together and creating a sense of belonging. Equally, 'similarity instead of superiority' is another key theme in female-focused marketing, building on the theory that women "are not driven by an operative emotion of envy" (Barletta, 2003, p.88). However, modern consumer researchers now argue that we are moving into a post-gender period, whereby the traditional lines of male and female representation are blurring (Patterson and Elliott, 2002). Instead, gendered consumption risks merely reinforcing prevailing roles and enhancing traditional practices (Avery, 2012).

2.3.2 Gendered advertising in automotive

Looking specifically at car brands, Avery (2012) analysed the application of gender norms for the car brand Porsche, specifically around the feminisation of its Cayenne SUV. Netnographic analysis around the brand placed high importance on the physical mastery of driving, with members of an online Porsche community talking about the assertion of manhood, especially in the face of 'spousal disapproval'. Commentary also discusses how Porsche sports cars require drivers to have traditionally masculine traits, such as strength and mechanical skill (Mishkind et al., 1987). Looking at the representation of Porsche across movies and television shows in a cultural analysis, Avery found just nine percent of them featured a female driver. However, early marketing material for the Cayenne SUV explicitly showed women drivers, with reference to "soccer mom promotions" and sponsorship of women's professional tennis reinforcing the 'gender bending' traits for the Porsche brand. Online comments from Porsche fans believed that the female stance of the Cayenne contaminated the brand's marker of masculinity and threatened "the masculine gender display of existing Porsche owners" (Avery, 2012, p.328). The analysis concludes that these

portrayed gender politics still matter, with men at the top of the power structure resisting contamination from women. Further research by UK-based automotive brand Auto Trader in 2018 found that 92 percent of consumers believe automotive marketing is too masculine, with 77 percent of women put off by such hyper-masculine creative techniques (McCarthy, 2018). Luxury sports car brands were the worst offenders followed by adverts for SUVs, aligning with the research discussed by Avery. Concluding the research, 76 percent of female drivers surveyed said they do not believe car brands understand a woman's car-buying needs (Avery, 2012).

Advertising to women presented brands with an issue on how to sell to an audience whose very use "devalues the product the industry is trying to sell" (Lezotte, 2012, p.517). Women were continually portrayed as those without technical confidence or competence in their cars, which contributed to a stereotypical gender identity, as well as a growing sexual stereotype (Wajcman, 1996). For many men, the stereotype of what is seen as feminine is "trivial at best, dangerous at worst" (Scharff, 1991, p.167). Even when automotive product offerings began to diversify to attract female drivers, the accompanying marketing remained either directed to male customers or notably gender neutral. Many adverts, including those for MINI and Audi, omitted using people in their marketing altogether, focusing solely on the cars themselves to avoid any recognition of female-influenced products (Lezotte, 2012).

2.4 Feminist approaches to marketing

As well as an understanding of how automotive marketing has progressed over the last 100 years, it is important to consider how feminist theories and approaches have become more relevant in the pursuit of inclusive marketing. There are close links between the representation of women in the media and feminist movements, with pressure being applied to the authentic representation of gender roles and the female body within mediated texts (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). This can be associated with the multiple wave narratives of

feminism; first-wave feminism is linked to the 20th-century suffragette movement, during which, marketing was viewed as a positive way of assisting publicity for the movement (Scott, 2005). Second-wave feminism, from the 1960s to 1980s, is associated with the movement demanding social and economic equality with men (Celeste, 2012). At this time, anti-marketing texts, including Germaine Greer's 'The Female Eunuch' (1970) and Betty Friedan's 'Feminine Mystique' (1963), publicised the debate on advertising images confining women to subordinate domestic roles as women and others. They suggested that the patriarchal market "manipulated women's bodies and desires to serve its interests" (Maclaran, 2015, p.1733). This period did see changes within marketing, with advertisers beginning to replace passive portrayals of women with varying and more sophisticated positions and roles.

Within the 1990s, the third-wave of feminism recognised the developing relationships between race, gender, ethnicity and class. This period focused on empowerment and diversity, helping to empower women's rights to gender expression and sexual choices (Celeste, 2012). Judith Butler's 'Gender Trouble' (1990) discussed a theory of gender performativity, focusing on the relationship between discourse and the materiality of the body (Maclaran, 2015). The use of gender-diverse marketing also grew during this time as 1990s capitalism reacted to such demand and celebration of cultural differences, with brands focusing on the 'pink pound' and using female empowerment to sell products to new markets (Jameson, 1991). Consumers also began looking to brands that aligned with their core values, and showed positive responses to those driven by strong and favourable brand associations (Keller, 1993).

2.4.1 Femvertising

Varghese and Kumar (2022) discuss the fourth wave of feminism and how this further relates to the development of advertising. This phase of the movement is built around the adoption

of the internet and social media, with a focus on stopping sexual harassment and violence against marginalised women. In marketing, this has resulted in a rise in the use of 'femvertising', an advertising style that "accentuates women's talents, spreads pro-woman messages and decimates stereotyping of women" (Varghese and Kumar, 2022, p.441). Studies have shown that using femvertising rewards brands by matching customer expectations and promoting women's empowerment (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2019). In certain cases, femvertising has been criticised for its use as merely a performance strategy, without the legitimate support and activism of women's empowerment around it; without a genuine commitment to feminist values, these advertising techniques risk appropriating themes and reinforcing old ideologies in regard to women's social status (McCleary, 2014). Yet when used correctly, research has shown significantly higher positive attitudes towards both adverts and brands, plus higher purchase intention, proving marketing relevance of the phenomenon (Varghese and Kumar, 2022).

Femvertising builds on previous theories about commodity feminism from the 1980s, a style of advertising whereby advertisements are used as vehicles of commodity narratives (Goldman et al., 1991). When consumers feel empowered through advertising, such as through engagement with femvertising brands, they use their purchasing power as a form of activism (Marcus Reker, 2016). This concept is also referred to as marketplace feminism, relating to overbearing feminist messages within the media. Zeisler (2017) discusses how empowerment is not a static concept but an evolving way of rethinking power structures. As such, brands should avoid using feminist taglines as a way of defining what both women and feminism is, and instead concentrate on messaging that validates courage, authenticity, intelligence and strength (Heffernan, 2017). Varghese and Kumar conclude by summarising the five key factors contributing to the development and critique of this area of marketing, including the growing activism of women in advertising, increased adoption of real-life brand activism, the rising critique of commodity feminism as a whole, increased awareness of gender stereotyping and increased scrutiny of gender roles in advertising (2022, p.452).

Further feminist epistemologies that can also be seen within marketing and consumer research include three key feminist traditions discussed by Bristor and Fischer (1995); liberal feminism, women's voice and experience feminism, and poststructural feminism. The first refers to the idea of men and women being inherently the same but defined by their unequal access to opportunity or resources; the second incorporates radical feminism with conceptualised women's experiences, bodies and socialisation being inherently different to men. The third discusses the deconstruction of gender binaries within language and discourse (Hearn and Hein, 2015).

2.4.2 Gender washing

The concept of gender washing has also been introduced into academic discussion, building on existing theory and literature on the concept of green washing, whereby "a range of communications mislead people into adopting overly positive beliefs about an organisation's environmental performance, practices or products" (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015, p.225). Walters (2022) adapts this definition to focus on communications used with the intent of misleading perceptions on a brand's practices, policies or products around women specifically. This includes the use of 'selective disclosure', using marketing and communication to emphasise areas where a brand is improving performance on gender issues, as well as 'misleading discourse' that uses "marketing campaigns aimed at positioning a corporation as a leading expert in women's empowerment, regardless of its track record in this area" (Walters, 2022, p.1585). An example is the 'Girl Effect' marketing campaign by Nike, aimed at encouraging global leaders to invest in girls' development in the Global South; however, at the same time, Nike was fighting a long-running battle surrounding the brand's use of child labour in its supply chains (Moeller, 2018).

2.4.3 Material-discursive

More recent feminist theory also links to the idea of a material-discursive relationship (Hearn, 2014). This concept looks at how objects, not just humans, produce agency, and how all things – human and non-human, tangible and intangible – relate to and shape one another (Barad, 2003). This creates an intra-activity whereby objects act and respond to each other (Steinfeld, 2021). Steinfield (ibid.) discusses how existing research into corporate women's empowerment omits the relationship of how objects shape humans and actions. Instead, a material-discursive analysis looks at how the material in feminism is explored through the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology and the environment without privileging any of these elements (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008). This is important to consider here, acknowledging how the culture and history of the automotive industry and cars as a whole can affect the agency and existence of women within the same space. Agency is placed through possibilities that emerge from the reconfigurations of material-discursive intra-activities. This is further explained as;

“Inter-activity, often examined through a cause-and-effect viewpoint, assumes that matter exists before it interacts or mingles with other elements. Although elements might ‘cause and effect’ each other, they are viewed as independent from each other. Intra-activity, however, positions elements as not existing independently; rather, they are constantly emerging from entanglements with each other.”
(Steinfeld, 2021, p.324)

This research will take note of such material-discursive analysis to discuss how the role of the motor car predisposes the representation of women within the same space, and if this cause and effect has affected developments within automotive marketing.

2.5 Theoretical framework

As highlighted in the literature review, there are a number of key discussions already present around the role of women within automotive marketing. To help with the analysis of this study, the key themes have been highlighted to provide a theoretical framework relevant for this research;

- Female representation and gender in advertising (Avery, 2012; Varghese and Kumar, 2022); femvertising (Goldman et al., 1991) and material-discursive (Hearn, 2014).
- Feminist epistemologies – how gender impacts the access to and allowance of knowledge (Harding, 1993; Bowden and Mummery, 2009), specifically within automotive (Clarsen, 2008; Lezotte, 2014).
- Women's position and representation within the automotive space as a whole (Scharff, 1991; Lezotte, 2012; Lorber, 1994).

These key points will be assessed during the analysis phase of this research to determine if and how Ford has advanced this existing understanding with its use of automotive advertising in a modern marketing landscape.

2.6 Conclusion

While research and communication about car advertising in the past is extensive, it is yet to be explored with more modern marketing analysis and discussion on whether these key gender issues and themes are still prevalent. This study aims to initiate that research with a look into recent advertising and see how Ford's campaigns either continue with or subvert the themes previously seen within the industry. It also offers an opportunity to analyse such examples through the lens of more modern concepts, including theories of femvertising and material-discursive.

3. Methodology

Crotty (1998) defines a conceptual framework relevant for this research, following four main elements of epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. Through this framework, the researcher must define an understanding of “the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general bias” (Honderich, 2005, p.523). This section outlines the research methodology used to analyse the selected campaigns through a case study design. This approach was chosen to explore how the campaigns construct and communicate their messages, aligning with the research aim of understanding how women are portrayed through modern feminist and marketing lenses.

3.1 Epistemology: Interpretivist

As this research is focused around a content analysis of existing campaigns, this study follows an inductive research approach. This is consistent with the basis of most interpretive studies as it allows the exploration of experiences and perspectives (Gray, 2021). This also best allows for qualitative analysis, looking at “patterns, consistencies and meanings” from data (ibid., p.18). An inductive approach starts with specific observations of data, working towards broader generalisations and patterns, building and developing new theories and concepts from the ground up.

Additionally, this research follows an interpretivist epistemology. For this study, an interpretivist approach involves analysing how the existing campaigns construct meaning about women drivers, and how these representations may be interpreted by audiences within social and cultural contexts. Interpretivism looks for “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations” of the social world (Crotty, 1998, p.67), based on the ontological assumptions that reality is “socially constructed, multiple, holistic and contextual” (Tadajewski, 2006, p.438). This analysis is not based on the ultimate success of the

campaigns, negating the need for data analysis of social media views or monetary profit. It instead focuses on how the campaigns show the socially constructed world through a subjective lens. As such, the interpretivist epistemology is most appropriate, allowing for the discussion of the advertisements within a contextual environment instead of providing a singular answer (Gray, 2021).

3.2 Theoretical perspective: Interpretivist feminist

Using an interpretivist feminist lens for this project allows the exploration of cultural meanings and gendered stereotypes conveyed through these campaigns. This considers the representation of the societal perceptions of women, particularly within such a male-dominated industry. Qualitative analysis is most relevant for studies of gender due to its base in human experience and observations (Grand, 2014). There has already been discussion on how traditional research protocols and methods assume predominantly masculine perspectives of society and sociology (Oakley, 1982), drawing attention to the use of “masculine modes [...] of formulating and carrying out research programmes” (Hirschman, 1991, p.324). Feminist theorists Bristol and Fischer (1993) highlight how gender bias and gender assumptions in sociology can be seen as a result of masculine research methods, with these stereotypes continuing through consumer research traditions. This has resulted in key areas of marketing and consumer research that still require further feminist perspectives (Maclaren, 2015), with researchers arguing for the opportunity to develop gender knowledge construction in these fields via feminist theories and perspectives (Hearn and Hein, 2015).

However, due to the varied and changing feminist perspectives available to the modern researcher, the adoption into consumer behaviour is complex. As already highlighted, there are multiple avenues of feminist and gender theory related to marketing and advertising, proving the difficulty of applying a single philosophy to the data. Instead, there are simultaneous existences of feminist philosophy offering multiple viewpoints to the research

(Bristor and Fischer, 1993). These multiple feminist positions illustrate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the theories across multiple avenues (Crotty, 1998). A general definition of feminism can be understood as “the belief that women [...] are treated inequitably within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns” (Gamble, 2001). As such, this research implores a generalised feminist viewpoint to provide a wider analysis of marketing techniques across these campaigns.

Additionally, there is ongoing academic debate between the inclusion of feminist theory into existing academic knowledge of marketing and advertising as a vital development of the field (Hirschman, 1991). Some researchers argue that the existing norms of academic knowledge need to be challenged (Stacey, 1993). There is also discussion that adopting the existing forms and theories follows masculine structures and instead restricts us through forms of oppression (Woodruffe, 1996). For this study, the research follows guidance from Stacey (1993), acknowledging the existence of multiple feminist viewpoints rather than one singular theory. As such, the campaigns are assessed through an understanding and interpretation of multiple feminisms. This provides a contribution to feminist research, understanding that feminist theory is a political and intellectual struggle (Harding, 1987), changing the way we view the world (Farganise, 1996) through an interpretivism feminist perspective.

3.3 Methodology: Case study

Ford has set itself apart with its approach at introducing female figures in recent campaigns, so it is worth looking at these in greater detail. As such, this research will be a focused case study of Ford Motor Company, looking at a selection of digital-first campaigns that feature females as the main character of the narrative. Looking at these campaigns offers an intensive study of one brand case, with an aim to shed light on the wider industry (Gerring, 2009). By examining intrinsic details of Ford's individual case, the case study methodology provides insight into the various factors influencing marketing phenomena within a real-life

context (Yin, 2003). Additionally, Schramm proposes that the purpose of a case study is to analyse decisions; “why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Schramm, 1971, p.12).

There is no consensus on the case study method, so this research follows an outline and procedure proposed by Merriam (1998). She specifically highlights the value of interpretivism through an epistemological stance, maintaining that qualitative researchers are interested in “multiple interpretations of reality”, constructed by people within their social worlds (Merriam, 1998, p.22). She goes on to define a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of abounded phenomenon” (ibid., p.xiii). As such, this research follows the five-step framework outlined by Merriam to create a case study research design:

1. Conducting a literature review
2. Constructing a theoretical framework
3. Identifying a research problem
4. Crafting and sharpening research questions
5. Selecting the sample (purposive sampling)

3.4 Research design

As highlighted in stage one of Merriam’s framework, the first phase of this research was to conduct a literature review to help develop the theory and research design for this project. By critically assessing a number of key papers related to feminist viewpoints, gender bias in marketing as well as wider automotive understanding specifically related to this case, this has allowed the conceptualisation of the research question, building a theoretical framework upon which the rest of the research process will be assessed. The literature review also helped identify a gap in existing research, assessing the development of automotive advertising against a more modern feminist and gender viewpoint. As such, based on an

understanding of modern feminist theories in marketing research, this research uses an interpretivist feminist theoretical perspective to associate multiple feminist viewpoints to automotive marketing. Based on this research problem, the following research questions were formed:

1. How do modern-day automotive advertisements portray women?
2. Which feminist theories or frameworks, if any, are reflected in these campaigns?
3. Do these campaigns resist or reinforce gender stereotypes, and to what extent?

The analysis will include a content analysis of the video advert and static-image content related to the campaigns, to discuss if gendered-marketing and feminist theories are present. This will conclude on how the theories of both automotive inclusivity and feminist marketing are present within the context of these campaigns. Alternatively, it may present new concepts of success or failure that are worth considering for future marketing approaches.

3.5 Data collection

It is understood that within a case study methodology, data must be gathered from multiple sources to ensure the case is assessed in its entirety (Yin, 2003). However, because this research focused on a single case study with a selection of campaigns produced by one company, the data analysed will be more limited in nature. Merriam (1998) discusses three main data collection techniques; conducting interviews, observing and analysing documents. While undertaking interviews and gaining primary data unique for this research may have opened up additional avenues of analysis, for this project, the data collection comes through the analysis of existing documents, in this case the advertising campaigns. Although this provides a limitation to the research, it instead offers an initial viewpoint into this research

gap and provides a starting point for further analysis within automotive marketing and beyond.

Looking at the campaign material through a content analysis presents the best research technique for the objective and systematic description of the content of communication (Berelson, 1952). As such, the campaigns analysed include the Ford Bronco “Mechanic” storytelling in the US, featuring Hollywood-actress Sydney Sweeney and her love of car mechanics. This campaign focused around a digital video but also included social media content and public relations (PR) promotion. Similarly, Ford launched the Ford Explorer car in Europe with a campaign featuring social media influencer Lexie Alford as she was challenged to “Charge around the Globe”. This included a video commercial, social media content and eventually evolved into a full television series, detailing the behind-the-scenes process of the campaign (Ford UK, 2024). Finally, a recent partnership fronted by advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy linked Ford with the idea of a “Passenger Princess”, creating supposedly female-focused products to use within the car (Hammond, 2024). All of the content sourced and analysed has been produced within the last 18 months, making it a contemporary analysis of the marketing themes already discovered.

3.6. Data analysis methods

This research used qualitative thematic analysis of the campaigns to identify and interpret patterns and meanings within the advertising content, and how these relate to the feminist theories and viewpoints already highlighted within marketing research. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework was referenced to help categorise elements of the campaigns:

1. Familiarisation
2. Initial coding

3. Theme identification
4. Review themes
5. Interpreting themes
6. Analysis

This also allowed for both an etic (top-down) and emic (bottom-up) analysis of the data; the analysis was guided by existing research and theory, highlighting themes to look at in this new research through an etic viewpoint. Additionally, the emic approach allowed for new patterns and ideas to be developed beyond existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3.7 Reliability and validity

The concepts of reliability and validity are typically used in quantitative research, although more modern academics have also adopted these traits in qualitative research. Using an interpretivist viewpoint and understanding of reliability considers neutrality, consistency, transferability and overall credibility as essential criteria for quality (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Additionally, Merriam (1998) provides techniques to help qualitative researchers enhance validity of their research, most significantly, the concept of internal validity. This is achieved through a reflective stance, assessing any influence or bias during the research process. For this project, the aim is to use purposeful and theoretical sampling to assess theories within a specified case. The purpose of this interpretivist research is to maximise the opportunity to discover new routes of analysis and application of theory within a select field, rather than to achieve external validity with generalised findings.

3.8 Ethical consideration

Since this study involves publicly available advertisements, no direct interaction with individuals was required. However, care was taken to attribute sources appropriately and to

avoid misrepresentation of the content. The content analysis was provided from secondary sources, including the videos and associated news articles. As such, there will be no ethical consideration needed to look at these examples as no personal data has been used.

3.9 Conclusion

This section has outlined and justified the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and data collection and analysis methods adopted for this research. It has also assessed the study's limitations while maintaining its potential to make a meaningful contribution to the existing literature around feminist and gender viewpoints across advertising and marketing as a whole.

4. Analysis and discussion

This chapter provides the analysis of the three chosen campaigns created by Ford, to determine how key themes of female representation within advertising and automotive have developed through modern campaigns.

4.1 Campaign context

This research looks specifically at three campaigns produced by Ford Motor Company. The first is the Ford Bronco “Mechanic” campaign created in the US, featuring Hollywood actress Sydney Sweeney and her love of car mechanics (YouTube – Best Commercials, 2023). This campaign focused around a digital video but also included social media content and PR material. The campaign shows Sydney dressed in dirty overalls, wearing gloves and goggles, and working on a Ford Bronco car in a workshop. It shows her holding tools, lying underneath the car and physically working on the vehicle (Figure 5). It also includes old footage of Sydney as a child, sitting in old cars from her childhood, and footage of her driving the finished car out on the road. This video was part of a bigger campaign by Ford titled “Build Ford Proud”, which “celebrates the greater community of Ford drivers who have broken the mold, driven innovation, and defied stereotypes for nearly 120 years” (Ford Newsroom, 2023). The voiceover for the video campaign includes commentary towards an empowering, feminist message, with Sydney saying: “The whole experience showed me I could do more than I thought I could. I hope other women see my passion for cars and want to follow their own passions, too” (Appendix A).



Figure 5. Screenshots from the 'Mechanic' video advert. From Best Commercials (2023). Sydney Sweeney x Ford Bronco | Built Ford Proud. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNQ1vVN0b30). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNQ1vVN0b30>.

The second advert analysed in this case study is for the new Ford Explorer car, which launched in Europe with a campaign featuring social media influencer Lexie Alford as she was challenged to “Charge around the Globe”. This included a television commercial, social media content and eventually evolved into a full television series, detailing the behind-the-scenes process of the campaign (Ford Media, 2024). The story paid homage to Aloha Wanderwell, famed for driving a Ford Model T around the world in the 1920s (The Henry Ford Museum, 2019). In this modern reinvention, Lexie – known by her social media handle “LexieLimitless” and recognised as the youngest person to visit every country in the world (Shoot, 2024) – is shown with the new car on off-road terrain, such as through a mountain and over snow. The on-screen text reads; “Aloha Wanderwell, the first woman to drive around the world, drove a Ford. This year, a new driver relives Aloha’s journey in a reinvented Ford that is all-electric” (YouTube – Ford Ireland, 2023). The main video campaign shows Lexie dressed in explorer-style clothing while travelling through extreme conditions, including a winter hat and ski jacket while hiking up a snowy mountain (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Screenshots from the 'Charge around the Globe' video advert. From Ford Ireland (2023). New, All-Electric Ford Explorer. [online] YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-zVSXKo7m8>.

Finally, a recent partnership campaign fronted by creative agency Wieden+Kennedy linked Ford with the idea of a “Passenger Princess”, creating female-focused products to use within the car (Hammond, 2024). Dictionary.com defines this slang term as “a woman who has others drive while she sits in the passenger seat [...] either because they don’t want to learn how or they prefer having others doing all the work” (Dictionary.com, 2023). On TikTok, the trend has amassed more than two billion views (Hammond, 2024). This concept was used to promote Ford’s hands-free driving capabilities, creating accessories to highlight that “when drivers take their hands off the wheel and keep their eyes on the road, they can enjoy a new hand freedom” (ibid.). The accessories included hand cream, a drinks tumbler, sunglasses and a fashion ring with the words “passenger” and “princess” on them, portrayed in a high-gloss studio environment with pink hues used throughout (Figure 7). The campaign was shared across social media with the aim of promoting the hands-free driving functionality of the Ford Mustang Mach-E.



Figure 7. Hammond, J.G. (2024). *Ford UK Leans on Social Culture with 'Passenger Princess' Push*. [online] Creativebrief. Available at: <https://www.creativebrief.com/bite/trend/ford-uk-leans-social-culture-passenger-princess-push>.

4.2 Structure

The literature review already concluded on relevant themes and theories to consider around the areas of gender and advertising, helping create a theoretical framework for this analysis. Applying this to the secondary data from the above campaigns will provide insightful analysis of the development of female-focused automotive advertising. Firstly, this analysis looks at themes of representation of women within the chosen campaigns, following research from Avery (2012), Verghese and Kumar (2022) and Hearn (2014). Secondly, the analysis will explore themes of feminist epistemology to examine their impact on advertising inclusivity and its development (Harding, 1993; Bowden and Mummery, 2009). Finally, the analysis concludes on how these campaigns contribute to or detract from women's representation within the automotive industry as a whole, including themes of gender stereotypes (Scharff, 1991; Lezotte, 2012, Lezotte, 2014). This also aligns with the proposed research questions.

4.3 Representation of women in Ford's campaigns

Looking first at the Sydney Sweeney 'Mechanic' campaign, it is worth acknowledging that the campaign itself was well received within the advertising and media industries. The campaign was shortlisted for a D&AD Creative Award in the 'Talent and Influencers' category, with the nomination describing how Sydney:

"...followed her passion for cars in a world where only 2 percent of women are mechanics. All in, the campaign earned 94.2 million impressions (33 percent higher female coverage), 10 percent incremental product sales at campaign peak (led by women) and increase in brand health metrics" (D&AD Awards, 2024).

Advertising awards are widely recognised as crucial to prove success and legitimacy of a campaign within the industry (West et al., 2019). However, the award that this campaign won was merely for its use of a celebrity; it could have been more powerful if the brand had worked towards a diversity and inclusion award as a way of advancing gender equality through advertising (Zayer et al., 2023).

Additional PR gained through the campaign also included an article by *Cosmopolitan* that interviewed Sydney as she drove the finished Ford Bronco. She shared her aims to help promote diversity within the car world through the campaign:

"My mom always told me that I shouldn't rely on a guy for anything, so knowing that I can go inside of my car to fix something or change a tire – and inspiring other girls to also have that empowerment as well – is amazing. There's no limit to what we can do." (Fuentes, 2023).

Additionally, Sydney's work with Ford developed beyond the initial campaign, with workwear clothing brand Dickies releasing a limited-edition collection of women's clothing in

collaboration with the actress (Dickies, 2023). This collaboration was picked up by women's magazine *Vogue*, where Sydney explained:

“co-creating workwear with Ford and Dickies was an opportunity to challenge the gender stereotypes traditionally associated with her hobby. ‘We wanted to create pieces for all genders and personalities,’ she says. ‘This can be a very male-dominated space, and I wanted to design pieces that feel more inclusive and fun.’” (O’Sullivan, 2023).

On a surface level, Sydney's 'Mechanic' campaign aims to lead the way in female representation within automotive by showing the lead character as a confident and knowledgeable woman within the car mechanic space. The resulting video offers a direct opposition to Scharff's previous findings on how women's driving is trivialised and devalued within society (Scharff, 1991), presenting a noticeable development in the representation of a woman's role within the automotive space. It also offers an alternative to Lezotte's review of the automotive industry, going beyond the stereotypes of the 'chick car' and instead offering women access into the “male territory” of automotive (Lezotte, 2012, p.521). By highlighting Sydney not only as an expert but someone with a passion for this industry offers the opportunity for access into these areas for the female demographic. Mishkind et al. (1987) discussed how drivers are often seen to require traditionally masculine traits, including strength and mechanical skill; Sydney is taking these stereotypical automotive tropes and succeeding with them while being a woman, subverting the norms and offering a new representation for women within the industry. The use of empowering language used in the voiceover, with Sydney saying “I hope other women see my passion for cars and want to follow their own passions, too” (Appendix A), means Ford is beginning to present a more diverse representation of women within its advertising, contributing to a more representative and inclusive society (Williams et al., 2004).

These more progressive themes can also be seen in Lexie's 'Charge around the Globe' campaign. While cars have mostly been identified with masculinity and mobility (Scharff, 1991), Lexie is presented as another strong, female character, taking on the role of an explorer within the narrative. This is not a career frequented by female representation; in 1932, the Society of Woman Geographers was created after the American Explorers Club refused to lift a ban on female members (Zanglein, 2021). While records of early female explorers are limited up until the 18th century, it is understood that in early world history, those that travelled did so as nomads, prisoners of war or in trade with their families (Thorne, 2019). The narrative of this campaign builds on the story of female explorer Aloha Wanderwell, who travelled the world across 43 countries in a Ford Model T car. By taking influence from this previous accomplishment, Ford is building on existing heritage to reinforce the brand's historical commitment to female empowerment within automotive. Having Lexie fulfil the role of an explorer presents her as a leader, showing how access to automotive can offer women independence and agency away from traditional domestic roles (Scharff, 1991). It also presents the car, the Ford Explorer, as a vehicle made for more than just traditional female roles of "carrying kids and cargo" (Lezotte, 2012, p.516). This emulates some of Ford's historical advertising campaigns, focusing on showing the mechanics and capabilities of the car driving off road, rather than associated buying and lifestyle benefits (Laird, 1996).

Previous research into automotive advertising highlights issues caused by including women in automotive marketing; using a female figure had been seen to "devalue the product the industry is trying to sell" (Lezotte, 2012, p.517). Yet the understanding of how fourth-wave feminism plays a part within modern advertising through the idea of 'femvertising' has encouraged representation such as the 'Charge around the Globe' campaign; this advert follows the femvertising advertising style that "accentuates women's talents, spreads pro-woman messages and decimates stereotyping of women" (Varghese and Kumar, 2022, p.441). By presenting strong, empowered female figures both through 'Charge around the

Globe' and the 'Mechanic' campaigns, Ford is appearing to enhance consumer empowerment, encouraging purchasing power as a form of activism (Marcus Reker, 2016).

Similarly, the 'Passenger Princess' social media campaign puts typically feminine products at the forefront of the collaboration. Creative agency Wieden+Kennedy describes how it "celebrates those who love taking control from the passenger seat while being driven in style [...] tapping into a cultural moment with humor and flair" (W+K London, 2024). However, the items created for the campaign are all female products, including hand cream and fashion accessories. As such, this campaign instead risks reinforcing prevailing gender roles and stereotypes as highlighted by Avery (2012). Historically, women are portrayed as those without technical confidence or competence in cars (Wajcman, 1996); by reinforcing these stereotypes through the idea of a 'passenger princess', Ford has instead portrayed that its female customers are better suited to sitting in the passenger seat. Similarly with Lexie's portrayal in 'Charge around the Globe', Ford could have used this opportunity to subvert some of the existing stereotypes, perhaps by marketing more gender-neutral accessories or by including some male-specific items such as a wallet or a tie clip. Additionally, the hand featured in the images clearly shows traits of a female hand, with long nails and thin fingers, reinforcing sexualised female images and contributing to the existence of objectification theory within advertising. This relates to Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) research on how a woman's body is separated from herself as a person; the images do not show a confident woman driving the car, but instead, just a pretty hand holding pretty items in the passenger seat.

4.4 Representation of feminist epistemologies in Ford's campaigns

Sydney's 'Mechanic' campaign seems to present a clear contradiction to previous ideas of women's access to automotive, specifically around feminist epistemology. Access to automotive knowledge has long been recognised as "male property", with cars remaining a

“prized masculine technology” (Clarsen, 2008, p.2). By showing the lead character of the campaign as an educated female with extensive automotive knowledge, so much so that she can repair and maintain her own car, this presents a new protagonist to challenge these stereotypes. The politics of this knowledge and the gender of the knower contribute to the overall production of this knowledge (Harding, 1993; Nelson, 1993), so using a woman to portray expertise in this field offers an opportunity to develop automotive knowledge in a new area. While car manufacturers used to establish themselves as a superior group of ‘ideal knowers’ (Harding, 1993), instead Ford is presenting Sydney as the expert within this campaign. Heffernan (2017) discusses how brands should use messages of courage, intelligence and authenticity to help develop feminist ideals within their advertising, all of which are portrayed here by Sydney. Highlighting this redistribution of knowledge and subsequent power offers a new example of women within automotive not previously seen in car advertising. This also relates to the concept of liberal feminism, whereby men and women are inherently the same but defined by their unequal access to opportunity and resources (Bristol and Fischer, 1995). The use of Sydney in this campaign offers an opportunity to present new feminist epistemologies within automotive marketing.

This also plays into theories on power dynamics; as the automotive space remains a male privilege (Penaloza, 1994), by expanding access to it through use of a woman protagonist, this brings the role of women out from the private sphere and into the public (Bowden and Mummery, 2009). Similarly, by having Lexie act as the hero of the ‘Charge around the Globe’ campaign, this helps portray a developed representation of typical gender roles and empowerment of the female body within mediated texts (Varghese and Kumar, 2022).

Ideas on how to market to women specifically through Barletta’s ‘Gender trends marketing model’ suggest that “similarity instead of superiority” is a key theme in gender-driven marketing, building on the idea that women “are not driven by an operative emotion of envy” (Barletta, 2003, p.88). However, by portraying both Sydney and Lexie as professionals in their field risks elevating them into more unrelatable characters; in the ‘Mechanic’ advert,

Sydney says “I come from a family of mechanics and I learned how to drive in my great-grandfather's F100” (Appendix A). This presents Sydney in an elevated position of power and expertise, pulling her further away from the average consumer. This instead creates a further divide between female customers, from those who have access to automotive knowledge and those that do not. This relates to Zeisler's (2017) idea on how empowerment is an evolving way of rethinking power structures; although Sydney appears to be in a position of power, the advert risks merely distributing power away from the consumer Ford is marketing towards in the first place. Brands will eventually face criticism if they do not follow through on these ideas of empowerment through the rest of its business ethos (McCleary, 2014). Although Bordo (1993) highlights the importance of representing feminist themes in mainstream avenues, if Ford cannot convincingly represent this ethos throughout the rest of its business credentials and advertising output, it risks misleading customers into the brand's practices and products for women on a broader scale through advertising gender washing (Walters, 2022).

4.5 Representation of gender within automotive

The “Mechanic” campaign appears to offer developments in terms of automotive marketing, showcasing a female as the protagonist. However, applying further themes of gender representation highlights other areas where these campaigns are falling into stereotypes, especially around undermining a woman's role within automotive. Although modern consumer researchers argue that we are moving into a post-gender period, whereby the traditional lines of male and female representation are blurring (Patterson and Elliott, 2002), some of these stereotypes are prevailing within these campaigns. Sydney is shown as a mechanic, which is traditionally known as a male-focused role, suggesting that she can only be the hero of this film because she is following a stereotypically masculine position of power. This aligns with theories on gender in advertising, whereby social gender displays can reinforce conceptions of masculinity (Lorber, 1994); is Sydney really being shown as a

strong, female figure if she has to portray masculine traits to do so? Ford is instead continuing to align its brand with masculine characteristics, building a masculine gender of its own (Avery, 2012); further research by Avery shows that promoting a brand or product with feminine characteristics is detrimental to consumption (ibid.). In the 'Mechanic' campaign, the car is still shown in the traditionally masculine setting of a workshop, with characters fulfilling traditionally masculine roles. The portrayal of gender is performed through symbolic interactions and social cues presented through the setting and even the clothing worn by Sydney (West and Zimmerman, 1987); it is a dirty workshop full of tools, and Sydney is wearing typically male-styled overalls. AutoTrader's research in 2018 found that 73 percent of those surveyed accused car adverts of "personifying gender stereotypes" (McCarthy, 2018); suggesting that Sydney is only allowed to be a part of this campaign because she has traditionally masculine knowledge and hobbies does little to move away from these stereotypes.

These themes are also prevalent in Lexie's 'Charge around the Globe' campaign; it is important to note that although the video shows the car in motion and driving along roads, the only footage of Lexie instead shows her outside and away from the car. The only connection shown between Lexie and the car itself is her standing next to it; there is no footage of her in the car or assuming a driving position. Brands have been known to limit women's access to automotive knowledge, allowing the industry to maintain power over female consumers (Lezotte, 2014). While it appears that Ford is leveraging its heritage to establish a commitment to women within the automotive space, the notion of Lexie actually driving the car and having agency over being a female driver is removed from the whole campaign. This aligns with ideas of gendered consumption, whereby existing portrayals are reinforcing prevailing roles and traditional practices, rather than offering an opportunity to develop and change perceptions (Avery, 2012). Despite the lack of connection or authority Lexie has as a driver during this campaign, she did go on to complete the world record adventure around the globe, covering over 30 countries in 200 days (Shoot, 2024). While

this analysis focuses on the advertising element of this campaign, it is worth noting that the subsequent television series that premiered on Amazon Prime presented behind-the-scenes footage that indeed showed Lexie taking control of the car and driving herself around the world. It is a shame, therefore, that this was not considered a focal point for the advertisement of the car itself. As such, Ford risks falling into issues of gender washing; developed from the definition of 'greenwashing', gender washing discusses how brands mislead people into adopting overly positive beliefs about the impact of an organisation's practices, policies or products around women specifically (Walters, 2022). The brand is happy to highlight Lexie in the advert, but not to show her having access to driving the new product.

These campaigns can also be analysed through a material-discursive relationship (Hearn, 2014), and how both tangible and intangible objects can be used to produce agency (Barad, 2003). In these campaigns, Sydney is shown wearing a mechanic's outfit of overalls, holding tools and working within a car garage. Lexie is also presented in a typically masculine outfit, acting as the role of an explorer and undertaking a stereotypically masculine role. Additionally, the very presence of automotive reinforces the masculine property and technology already historically claimed by men (Clarsen, 2008); it is important to acknowledge how the existing culture of automotive can continue to affect the agency and existence of women within the same space (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008). While this presents opportunities for intra-activity, whereby the people and objects can act and respond to each other (Steinfeld, 2021), the result of this is still a presentation of a masculine environment. The cause-and-effect viewpoint created during this campaign does not show Sydney as a confident woman who also happens to be a mechanic, but instead, first and foremost as a mechanic who also happens to be a woman. She is being used to fulfil a masculine role with the added benefit of being a woman; there is still a necessity to fulfil male tropes and roles in order to be a part of this narrative. Similarly, Lexie is not shown to be a powerful female driver exploring the world, but instead, a female explorer who happens to be driving a car –

or, in the case of this advert, standing next to it. Steinfield (2021) suggests that successful corporate women's empowerment omits the relationship of how objects shape humans and actions, giving agency to women themselves; that perspective is not presented in the Ford campaigns, resulting in a lack of authentic female empowerment around the act of driving and being a car owner.

Furthermore, the 'Passenger Princess' campaign has been photographed and designed with traditionally feminine colours, specifically pink, which is widely recognised as being a marker of female gender and sexuality (Koller, 2008). These gender cues activate gender-stereotypical knowledge that can be associated with brands during a purchasing decision, depending on the presence of other cues (Hess and Melnyk, 2016). The colour pink is also known to be associated with the concept of the 'pink tax', whereby women pay more for products similar or equal to the comparative men's product (Lafferty, 2019). By producing this campaign with pink colours and feminine products, the 'Passenger Princess' imagery instead reinforces gender stereotypes through situated, symbolic social cues (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This further emphasises mis-placed conceptions of femininity for Ford customers (Lorver, 1994). However, it could be argued that there are positives to come from this portrayal, as this suggests Ford is not afraid to relate its products to feminine traits; suggesting a brand has feminine characteristics has been shown to be detrimental to consumption, as men are less likely to associate with such products (Avery, 2012). In this case, it could be commended that Ford has presented a campaign using brand messaging based around such stereotypes and is not afraid to associate its masculine products with feminine traits.

Ultimately, however, these three campaigns still align with conclusions on advertising images from the 1960s and 1970s, whereby women were shown in subordinate roles and with images and desires manipulated to serve the patriarchal market (Maclaren, 2015). The fourth wave of feminism, built around female representation and safety across the internet

and social media, contributes to femvertising (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). When used correctly, this advertising style has shown higher positive attitudes towards a brand along with higher purchasing intention by linking objects to feminist ideas or values (Goldman et al., 1991). This would suggest there is still work to be done for Ford to develop its representation of women within its campaigns in order to align with more modern feminist ideals.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary

This study has explored the representation of women in modern automotive advertising, with a focus on gender stereotypes and female restrictions within the automotive space. Ford has recently set itself apart by creating a number of automotive advertising campaigns featuring a female protagonist. Ideally, this research would assess multiple campaigns from different manufacturers, but due to the lack of data available, this has created a compelling case study of one brand aiming to lead the way in the consumer space, for which Ford must be commended.

The three campaigns analysed – Sydney's 'Mechanic', Lexie's 'Charge around the Globe' and the 'Passenger Princess' campaigns – can be interpreted with both positive and negative themes. Both Sydney and Lexie are portrayed as protagonists in stereotypically masculine roles and shown as knowledge holders and experts within their field; as such, these campaigns challenge historical discussion that automotive is a masculine realm, contributing to redefining power dynamics within the industry (Harding, 1993; Clarsen, 2008). Presenting women in traditionally masculine roles helps redefine stereotypes within the field and subvert tropes seen within existing automotive research (Scharff, 1991; Lezotte, 2012). This modern representation of feminist epistemologies through automotive marketing offers a way of redefining female empowerment within the world of automotive, showcasing that a woman's access to automotive is not just restricted to the traditional female roles of "carrying kids and cargo" (Lezotte, 2012, p.516). This presents a noticeable development from the historical examples of automotive advertising discussed throughout the literature review.

However, this representation also risks alienating customers by instead reinforcing prevailing masculine roles and traditional practices (Avery, 2012). The use of gender roles and

stereotypes throughout the campaigns still ultimately shows that the only way for a woman to access the “male property” (Clarsen, 2008) of automotive is to assume a masculine role. Sydney is only given precedence as a protagonist because she has access to automotive knowledge, while Lexie is shown throughout as an explorer but never as an actual driver of the car. The lack of agency given to Lexie as a driver in the ‘Charge around the Globe’ campaign means she is still ultimately represented as someone removed from automotive access. Additionally, the ‘Passenger Princess’ campaign reverts to stereotypical portrayals of gender and femininity through its use of products, colours and other symbolic cues, reinforcing an idea of women being submissive and restricted to sitting in the passenger seat (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Lorber, 1994, Avery, 2012). All of these campaigns would benefit from highlighting women in the driving seat and promoting an ideology of female drivers being just as accepted and promoted within the automotive space; this empowerment would help contribute to the evolution of power dynamics for women within the industry (Zeisler, 2017). This would also contribute further to ideas of ‘femvertising’, using marketing to accentuate women’s talents and spread pro-woman messaging (Varghese and Kumar, 2022).

As such, Ford’s concluding message risks suggesting that the everyday woman, who portrays traditional feminine traits and without access to automotive knowledge, is still best suited to sitting in the passenger seat and avoiding driving altogether. Both Ford and the automotive industry should focus on how to include the everyday woman within the public sphere of automotive and transportation (Bowden and Mummery, 2009), without needing to fulfil the traditionally male requirements of knowledge of the automotive space. It is also important for Ford to follow through on its supposed commitment to women in the industry across the rest of its organisation to avoid being labelled simply as “gender washing” within its marketing (Walters, 2022).

5.2 Contribution to existing knowledge

While there is extensive commentary on previous automotive campaigns and the role of women within car advertising over the past 100 years, the analysis of more modern campaigns using more contemporary feminist and consumer theories has not yet been looked at. This study has gone some way in applying ideas of femvertising, feminist epistemology, material-discursive and gender washing into the realm of automotive advertising, to create new conclusions on existing examples. The resulting conclusions show that there are still areas within marketing that need further development to help represent diversity and inclusion throughout this area of media (Zayer et al., 2023). As well as providing academic insight, this research ultimately aims to offer suggestions and avenues of improvement for future automotive campaign development, bringing attention to what areas brands need to refine in the pursuit of inclusive advertising.

5.3 Self reflection

The author is ultimately pleased to see a sign of change within the automotive space and although this analysis offers a critical review of such campaigns, the positive outcomes from this research provides reassurance that the industry is indeed changing to adapt to modern themes and representations. Ideally, this research would have analysed multiple campaigns from a number of different automotive brands in order to give a broader analysis of the sector as a whole. The author hopes that, given a chance to conduct similar research in future, additional campaigns may provide more avenues for analysis and discussion across a broader spectrum of the automotive space.

5.4 Future research

In the early stages of this research, it was quickly established that Ford is currently the only brand using ideas of female empowerment in its marketing strategies. It is hoped that further campaign development across multiple brands will offer more avenues of insight and discussion in this developing area of marketing. Alternatively, future research could suggest specific areas for brands to focus on in future campaign development and marketing strategies, as a way of offering brand management advice to alternative automotive retailers. It would also be beneficial to further examine these and any future examples through a deeper gender-washing perspective, to see if the use of female empowerment is indicative of a developing automotive industry as a whole. The impact of Ford's practices and products towards women throughout the entire organisation is important to consider in a broader discussion of gender inclusion (Walters, 2022).

Finally, it could be worth undertaking some primary data collection through interviews or market surveys, to see how the everyday female consumer feels about this style of marketing. While the academic analysis here has provided both positive and negative discussion of these campaigns, if future female car buyers feel inspired by campaigns such as Sydney and Lexie to discover a love of driving or consider an exciting new car purchase, then that can ultimately only be a positive.

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7. Appendix

Appendix A - *Transcript of Sydney Sweeney's 'Mechanic' video advert. From Best Commercials (2023). Ford Commercials | Sydney Sweeney x Ford Bronco | Built Ford Proud. [online] www.youtube.com. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNQ1vVN0b30>.*

"I come from a family of mechanics and I learned how to drive in my great-grandfather's F100. I think that's when I first fell in love with Ford. A vintage Ford Bronco was my dream, dream car. I wanted that car so bad.

I was the only girl in the shop. I changed the transmission, added power steering, new brakes, updated the radio, the suspension, redesigned the interior and added a roll bar, but that was just the beginning.

At first, I made videos to show just my family the process but it turned out that a bunch of other people loved seeing them too. Once I finished my Bronco, I had to get a Mustang, of course.

The whole experience showed me I could do more than I thought I could. I hope other women see my passion for cars and want to follow their own passions, too."

Appendix B - Birkbeck Ethics Application - Secondary Data Analysis

Response ID: cm0y0cbt600t311ftatx3b1s9

Submitted Wednesday 11th September 2024

Appendix C - MSc Marketing Research Proposal

Preliminary research for this paper was submitted as part of Birkbeck "**Research Methods In Management (Postgraduate) Individual Research Proposal**" on 11th March 2024, **Turnitin ID 226339864**. That submission has been built upon for the completion of this paper.