HOW TO SPEAK WOMAN

The journey of female archetypes
Rethinking ‘femininity’
Soft power
Keeping pace with ever-changing expressions
They claim we’re in the era of women. That huge cultural shifts – such as the #metoo movement and strength of mainstream feminism – have finally brought the female experience to the fore. Yet only 14 percent of women in the US and UK relate to the way they’re represented in advertising (Crowd DNA’s research with OnePulse). According to McCann, 66 percent of Canadian women claim brands are too tied to gender norms; and, in Engine’s 21st Century Woman report, 76 percent thought that advertising fails to represent modern femininity, while a further 86 percent believed that brands present a very stereotypical view of life.

It seems that, despite recent attention, brands are still struggling to get the conversation surrounding women right. Or are simply too scared to change how they speak in fear of being accused of tokenism.

So what is it about representing women that brands aren’t getting right? Why, amongst all the current discussion, is this still happening?

Part of the problem is that narratives shift at lightning speed. Recent movements are applauded for sparking debate around women, womanhood and femininity*, but they’re also key players in wider cultural tensions. Google, for example, next to the worldwide walkout in protest against the treatment of female employees, is simultaneously being sued for discriminating against conservative, white men. All this creates an emotionally-charged and extremely challenging landscape for brands. There’s a sense of urgency to ‘get it right’. And harsh punishment for those who ‘get it wrong’ or slip down the slope of superficial tokenism.

In our latest Crowd DNA report, we help brands navigate this challenge and speak to women both now and in the future. Using an archetypal framework, we’ll show how expressions of womanhood have evolved through past and present gender narratives, before looking at emerging portrayals of femininity. We ask: how can brands build empathy and strengthen connections with women? How do we keep up when the narratives change so quickly? And should we even be talking about binary expressions in the first place?

As always, get in touch if you’d like to chat further: hello@crowdDNA.com

Thanks for reading,

Crowd DNA

*At a glance: five cultural movements changing the conversation

- The #metoo movement continues to grow in all corners of the globe
- India’s #aintnocinderella caption goes viral in response to archaic curfews for women
- In 2017, an Australian senator breastfed her baby for the first time in the nation’s parliamnet
- Female sports journalists in Brazil address the harassment they face with the #letthemwork campaign
- Ireland finally revokes the ban against safe and legal abortions, supporting women’s right to choose
Maintaining cultural relevance has never been so important (or difficult) when representing womanhood.

We need to stop talking about women, and start talking to them.

Here’s how we’re going to do this...

THE CLASSIC ARCHETYPAL FRAMEWORK

We’ll use this as a device to look at the past, present and future of female archetypes.

Archetypes are used to describe universal patterns in behaviour through which humans see and experience the world. They can be applied to characteristics, personalities and entire brand identities. Whether conscious or not, the way audiences and people are presented often embodies one of these 12 archetypes; originally defined by Carl Jung. What’s important is that these archetypes are traditionally incredibly gendered. Take a look below:
Past: Reinforce

To understand where we need to go, we need to understand where we’ve been.

For decades, brands, culture, comms and advertising have been wrapped up in reinforcing traditional feminine archetypes. And, yes, it’s the three you’d expect from the framework: the lover, the innocent and the caregiver. All have been strongly reinforced in the media for a very long time. Here’s how they’ve affected the portrayal of women...

The Lover

This highly controversial Dolce & Gabbana advert garnered negative attention as the scene appears to glamourise gang rape. There is one, sexualised and submissive woman clearly presented as an object.

DKNY and Dolce & Gabbana both show women with apples as a reference to Eve, original sin and, ultimately, women’s responsibility for the fall of man.

Here, the female character is dehumanised and reduced to nothing more than a desirable part of her body.

Overwhelming amount of skin on show and often in positions of vulnerability.

A Victoria’s Secret model reclines in a submissive, animal-like pose.

Women as a sexualised object of desire.
Daisy by Marc Jacobs has been built around imagery of childlike nymphets frolicking in summer meadows while the viewer plays the role of voyeur. Scenes of innocence and fragility are played out before the viewer is invited in by a submissive, girl-like character.

**THE INNOCENT**

**Women as pure, honest and child-like.**

Largely represented by young, white women wearing light-coloured dresses symbolic of chastity and angels and/or children.

Infantilization is also common via submissive and diminutive poses where women are being followed or looked down on. This is often coupled with disturbingly sexual overtones.

**THE CAREGIVER**

**‘Caregiving’ is depicted as raising and caring for a family, but also the menial task of cleaning up after them.**

Here we see the mother figure stood front and centre gleefully spraying pink femininity over the smell of toilets and old shoes, while her husband and child get on with more pleasurable activities in the background, paying no notice to her and her “duty.”

**Stereotypical ‘busy mum’ imagery.**

Woman as the mother, life-bringer and source of comfort.

There’s a worrying intergenerational aspect. Many adverts show women passing on domestic knowledge to their eager daughters. In this case: how Fairy not only gets glasses clean, but also keeps hands soft. Win, win!

**Subservient roles falling somewhere between domestic bliss and chaos.**

**Caregiving**

Women in need of being saved or cared for and treated gently.

Women as pure, honest and child-like.

Largely represented by young, white women wearing light-coloured dresses symbolic of chastity and angels and/or children.

Infantilization is also common via submissive and diminutive poses where women are being followed or looked down on. This is often coupled with disturbingly sexual overtones.

**THE CAREGIVER**

Here we see the mother figure stood front and centre gleefully spraying pink femininity over the smell of toilets and old shoes, while her husband and child get on with more pleasurable activities in the background, paying no notice to her and her “duty.”

**Stereotypical ‘busy mum’ imagery.**

Woman as the mother, life-bringer and source of comfort.

There’s a worrying intergenerational aspect. Many adverts show women passing on domestic knowledge to their eager daughters. In this case: how Fairy not only gets glasses clean, but also keeps hands soft. Win, win!

**Subservient roles falling somewhere between domestic bliss and chaos.**

‘Caregiving’ is depicted as raising and caring for a family, but also the menial task of cleaning up after them.
The reinforcement of traditional stereotypes is dwindling as a dominant narrative around ‘claiming’ womanhood continues to rise. This is where the meaning of feminity is extended into traditionally male archetypes. Introducing: the every(wo)man, the female hero and the girl-rebel. This extension makes for a more inclusive, diverse and altogether less passive representation of women, but it also reframes the three original archetypes too.
The success of the TV series Girls also celebrates and claims the everyday(woman) archetype. The show is seen as a refreshingly ‘real’ depiction of life as a young woman and has created space to acknowledge and embrace flaws, as well as strengths.

**THE EVERY(WO)MAN**

- **Her purpose**: to promote acceptance and belonging.
- **The every(woman) is unpretentious, down to earth and humble.**

No brand better embodies claiming the every(woman) archetype than Dove. Their ‘real beauty’ campaign reappropriates what it means to be a woman by being honest, authentic and unapologetic about the female experience.

**THE HERO AND THE REBEL**

- **Stances and postures display attributes of physical power and dominance via aggressive action; all of which are masculine norms being claimed.**

Girls from Compton don’t play tennis. They own it.

All nod to a ‘girls can do it too’ attitude.

The hero – who is known to be bold, courageous and determined – is clearly portrayed in Always’ #LikeAGirl campaign and Sport England’s This Girl Can.

This is currently the dominant expression of womanhood: showing pride in the lived experience of women and overcoming archaic narratives of passivity.

The girl-rebel is a subversive, disruptive force looking to drive change and break taboos.

Iconically masculine archetypes are being claimed.

Reinforcing

Present

Claiming

and Reframing

Future

Rethinking
Not stopping there, the emergence of these claimed archetypes has meant that the three original characters have changed, too. As women start being shown as the every(wo)man, rebel and hero, traditional expressions of femininity are reframed in response. The lover, innocent and caregiver are still acknowledged but rather than rejecting them entirely, their expressions are being reframed. This creates new archetypal narratives that feel culturally relevant to the modern woman.

A clear progression from women as sexual objects to individuals in command of their own sexuality.

Challenges to the traditional masculine/feminine paradigm.

Sensuality and pleasure openly expressed in a more playful way.

More diversity in relationships and wider representations of sexuality.

Ok Cupid’s DTF-All Head Over Heels campaign explores the many forms relationships can take. This ad displays two women wearing ordinary clothes but in a stance reminiscent of a cheesy romance novel. This carves out a space for diversity in the established ‘love story’ and also exposes how archaic the traditional idea of love is when placed in contemporary culture.

Not stopping there, the emergence of these claimed archetypes has meant that the three original characters have changed, too. As women start being shown as the every(wo)man, rebel and hero, traditional expressions of femininity are reframed in response. The lover, innocent and caregiver are still acknowledged but rather than rejecting them entirely, their expressions are being reframed. This creates new archetypal narratives that feel culturally relevant to the modern woman.:}
The innocent

FROM: Submission, vulnerability and weakness
TO: Purity, acceptance and authenticity

Innocence is aligned with honesty, authenticity and self-acceptance.

Glossier’s aesthetic of stripped-back purity encourages women to embrace their true selves through self-care. A message which has been well received all around the world.

Women are positioned head-on and maintain personal agency - there are no voyeurs here.

The refraamed innocent embraces themes of authenticity and openness rather than fragility.

Light tones and bare skin still play a role, but now with a diverse group of women.

THE CAREGIVER

FROM: Providing care, comfort and all things domestic
TO: A source of strength, resilience and soft power

The caregiver has been reframed to be a source of strength, not just comfort.

Exploring the strength and soft-power of mothers.

Varied expressions of caregiver roles for women.

P&G’s Thank You Mum campaign during the 2016 Olympics shows how the caregiver archetype isn’t passive, but is instead anchored in a place of strength.

Diverse forms of female caregivers are seen in Vicks’ Touch Of Care ad, which tells the story of a transgender mother-daughter relationship.

Power is no longer tied to masculinity. Women are reframing it to include ‘soft power’, which honours the unique strength of femininity. Across Southeast Asia in particular, empowerment doesn’t look the same as it might in the west; it’s not angry or loud, and there’s no rejection of historic norms. Instead a much softer, distinctly-female approach is coming to the fore. Women report, for example, being able to adopt a chameleon-like identity with their ability to adapt and mould to different situations seen as as a way to get what they want. Power — and what it looks like on the surface — is definitely shifting.

SOFT POWER

Past
Reinforcing

Present
Claiming

Future
Reframing

Rethinking

Rethinking
Wider macro shifts such as the rise of multiple identities; the celebration of self-care and self-acceptance; and the acknowledgement of intersectional experiences have all had a huge impact on gender expression. As a result, a new code is emerging, and that’s: rethinking feminine archetypes. This is where the experience of womanhood is acknowledged as fragmented, diverse, non-binary and related to our identity, not necessarily our biology.

But what are the future expressions of womanhood? Does a collective female experience even exist?

FUTURE: RETHINK

THE CREATOR

This process of ‘rethinking’ womanhood is driving female representation into a whole new archetype. As time goes on, keep an eye out for: women as the creator.

What will be interesting to see is whether single archetypes remain so rigidly applied in the future. As the modern female experience continues to be explored, expressions will no doubt start to converge and blend, with pick-and-mixed characteristics from across the whole archetypal wheel. Unfixed, fluid and bricolage approaches will hopefully come to define narratives of womanhood – just like actual women themselves.

Expressive, original and imaginative.

Unfixed and undefined by narrow definitions, they create their own way of being.

Constantly changing and innovating their identity(s).
So how do we keep up with these ever-changing expressions—both now, and in the future?

1. **DON'T PANIC. THIS IS SIMPLY ABOUT RETHINKING RESTRICTIVE EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER**

   It’s easy to assume that non-binary and fluid representations are going to eradicate gender and the ability to ‘target’ women altogether. They’re not. This is just about rethinking restrictive expressions and transforming traditional narratives. Do this by embracing individuality and working hard to understand the real, gendered lives of your brand’s tribe by talking to their unique experiences of womanhood.

2. **EMPOWERMENT IS IMPORTANT (OBVS); BUT AIM FOR ACTION TO AVOID TOKENISM**

   To put it simply: break boundaries and then walk the talk. If you’re making a statement about women or trying to better their lives in some way, you need to do more than just show diversity. Take a point of view and act on it, properly. Remember that the cause or tension you’re aiming to solve needs to be culturally relevant and aspirational for your audience.

3. **THERE’S NO NEED TO PAINT THINGS PINK**

   While representing womanhood is important, creating products entirely for women is only required if there’s a physiological need for it, or if it’s going to make their life better in a way that it wouldn’t for a man. Acknowledge that products don’t need a gender and focus on the insight or tension that you are delivering against instead.

4. **REMEMBER THAT WOMANHOOD ISN’T EXPERIENCED THE SAME WAY AROUND THE GLOBE**

   Cultural differences mean that archetypes manifest in different ways, which is obviously key in communicating with the women who exist within them. Understand that being culturally relevant completely depends on context. The Indian diamond brand Tanishq is a great example of this. Their work over the last couple of years has broken boundaries by showing women managing a work/life balance, taking on both nurturing and authoritative roles and being successful on their own terms. Although in western markets the symbol of a working mother is more established, in India, breaking out of stifling gender roles garners more attention and places the brand in a more progressive category.

5. **AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, TALK TO WOMEN NOT ABOUT WOMEN**

   Tap into leading edge minds and speak to cultural gatekeepers to ensure you understand the existing nuances, idiosyncrasies and future female expressions with local precision. Get to know the breadth of your audience by engaging women of different experiences, identities, cultures and backgrounds. And, finally, think about how you recruit participants, ask for details or talk about...
Crowd DNA is a cultural insights and strategy consultancy with offices in London, Amsterdam, New York & Singapore.

Formed in 2008, operating in 55+ markets, we bring together trends specialists, researchers, strategists, writers, designers and film-makers, creating culturally charged commercial advantage for the world’s most exciting brands.