



IFLA Section  
News Media

## IFLA International News Media Conference 2024

---

### **Reading Between Bodies: Visual Media Literacy and Gender in Early Twentieth Century Newspaper Advertising**

**Hannah Gale Lindsey**

Digital Newspaper Unit, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, USA.

E-mail address: HannahGale.Lindsey@unt.edu

**Brooke Edsall**

Digital Newspaper Unit, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, USA

E-mail address: Brooke.Edsall@unt.edu



Copyright © 2024 by Hannah Gale Lindsey and Brooke Edsall This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

---

#### **Abstract:**

*To support practices in growing visual media literacy skills, one possible research strategy is to employ critical theory to contextualize print advertising over time that is intended to reinforce a cultural ideal. This research uses tools of visual analysis and contextualization to interrogate message presentation practices across historic news sources, specifically advertisements, with the goal of understanding gender stereotypes in early 20th-century news advertisements. This research is a case study that demonstrates strategies that could be employed in other research contexts, including the university classroom environment.*

**Keywords:** Visual literacy, newspapers, advertisements, gender.

---

### **1 READING BETWEEN BODIES: VISUAL MEDIA LITERACY AND GENDER IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING**

The classification of advertisements, especially newspaper advertisements, as an artform is easily contested due to their existence as both a tool to further consumer consumption and as a piece of visual history. Due to this dual nature, visual analysis of print advertisements from the original

source gives insight into the community it was trying to goad into buying a product. The viewers of an advertisement tend to immediately analyze the visual components of an advertisement because the constant exposure to visual promotions allows space for knowledge of visual language to grow (Newman & Ogle, 2019). However, these advertisements are often rapidly dismissed without any further thought being put into the why or how of the image. It is important to understand the context and production of an advertisement because advertisers must have a deep understanding of the culture and power structures within a society to appeal to an audience of consumers (Berger, 2021). In this way advertisements preserve the ideals of a period of time through these appeals, but it requires specialized vocabulary and skills to fully comprehend the underlying connections found within these visuals. Visual media literacy equips viewers with the ability to analytically inspect an image before coming to conclusions about the meaning of a piece of visual media. This set of skills involves viewing an image with a different set of lenses to contextualize, evaluate, and decode the message being conveyed within a shared knowledge (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2020). While much of this is an instinctive aspect of looking at an image, viewers hone visual literacy skills when given the chance to critically interact with visual media from the past and present.

This research utilizes a selection of newspaper advertisements from the 1920s to illustrate how the incorporation of visual analysis can benefit the development of visual literacy skills for use in research, the classroom, and general communication. For these examples, we have chosen to analyze what a selection of 1920s fashion advertisements convey about gender to narrow this scope of investigation. Through the intentional consideration of factors such as posing, composition, and context, researchers can better understand both the content of images and the cultural significance they portray. We have chosen to use historical examples to demonstrate these techniques because they hold strong visual messages that might not be immediately clear to a twenty-first century reader. By necessitating intentional contextualization and visual analysis, it is our belief that the methodology and benefits of visual literacy skills will be more clearly articulated. This paper first provides broad, historical context to the culture and impact of advertising, consumerism, and gender and the body in the early twentieth century, it then uses a selection of advertisements to highlight analysis of posing, stylistic choices and representation, and visual interaction with copy. We then conclude with final recommendations for using and teaching visual literacy techniques.

The power of analyzing visuals found in advertisements is well documented, but magazines are often the focus of study (Alexander, 2021). Advertisements taken from newspapers instead of magazines are of particular interest because newspapers were more readily available to a wider audience and easily disposable due to the rate of publication. Additionally, newspapers were historically much more accessible than magazines, with at least one paper serving most communities. The information a person consumes through information sources such as newspapers both reflect and shape their identity, their perception of society, and how they function within society. Fashion advertisements hold their focus on the visual, and the components of these visuals reveal a wealth of insight into the function of a community and their collective identity, especially in how they regard gender roles.

## **2 CULTURAL IMPACT OF ADVERTISING**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, consumerism came to the foreground of American identity and culture. Factors including increased industrial production, new technologies, and institutional development made this period an era of economic growth and advertising professionals into rising influencers as to where Americans chose to spend their money. However, the art of advertising did not solely direct spending, but also prescribed an idealized version of American culture. Branding and commercial goods soon came to define shared American heritage just as much as its history and politics. The continuous economic growth that advertising represented reaffirmed beliefs of national progress and civilization, and abundance became synonymous with the American identity (McGovern, 2006; Lears, 1994). This idealized vision of American identity is the enduring influence of advertising. To promote products, advertisers recreate epitomized displays of life meant to inspire consumers to act. However, the influence of these displays goes beyond branding and consumerism, and rather serves to reinforce an idealized norm as advertisers see it. These images package the complexities of broad social arrangement and power into accessible bits that can be interpreted instantly. Composition of these images reflect power dynamics, social standards, and can be symbolic for how Americans wish to see themselves (Goffman, 1979). In many ways, the images included in advertising are unrealistic. There are very few people who can truthfully see themselves within advertising, which is really a goal of the medium - to be aspirational. However, it is the ways in which advertising is unrealistic that most illustrates intangible facets of hegemonic power and identity.

Additionally, the consumption of these images affects their impact. Advertisements appear in an often daily, low stakes viewing environment, slotted between news articles that seem to be much more important to the reader. This passive consumption of content allows for these images to be under scrutinized and presented as a normal image of anonymized people. It is through this passive consumption of manufactured norms that these advertisements carry important cultural value. Normates, or figures meant to embody all factors of normalcy, are representative of broader hegemonic power structures, not of real people in real settings. Normates are dependent on their historical context, but are almost always young, married, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, employed, of proportionate height and weight, and other hegemonic qualities. The passive consumption of these normates in epitomized displays of American life normalizes these images and casts them as simple and natural (Thomson, 1997). This means that as readers see these idealized images, over and over, recognizing patterns and underlying power structures without intentional scrutiny, these unrealistic images become the representation of what is considered natural. However, the problem with this is that exceptionally few people actually are represented by this normate. This means that rather than being an average person in a mathematical sense, these normates are really more of an amalgamation of the apex of varying power structures.

In the context of this research, normates analyzed throughout these advertisements embodied the hegemonic ideals of the early twentieth century. Intersecting systems of power and oppression throughout this period favored patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, ageism, and a conformity to traditional gender expression. Therefore, the normates seen here were primarily young, white, able bodied, heterosexual people who conformed to their gender assigned at birth. Recognizing who was excluded from mass advertising is just as important of an indicator of broad cultural values as who was included. The absence of people of color, people with disabilities, and people

of other marginalized groups in these advertisements demonstrates their distance from the normate and these intersecting systems of oppression.

### **3 GENDER AND ADVERTISING**

Consumption and advertising were highly gendered. Common belief from the twentieth century held that women did 85% of household purchasing. While this number was almost certainly inflated and men were likely involved in household purchasing decisions, women did the primary labor of shopping and buying. This led advertisers to target advertising to women in an attempt to direct what they assumed to be women's irrational consumption (McGovern, 2006). Though some women were able to make careers in specialized advertising departments, the majority of advertisers were male (Simone Weil Davis, 2019; Jennifer Scanlon, 2020). This meant that there was an additional layer of the male gaze added into these advertisements meant to appeal to women. Most advertisements were created by men attempting to prescribe how women saw themselves or what they wished to be. This issue of men determining what women wanted led to various modes of thinking in advertisements. Some believed that women were naturally talented consumers but were still incompetent or overwhelmed by options and needed advertising to direct their tastes. Others framed products in business terms and envisioned women as household professionals aiming to make their lives more efficient. Advertisers appealed to women's sense of tradition, modernity, suffrage, class, sovereignty, and just about any other facet they believed could direct consumption to a brand or product (McGovern, 2006).

For clothing advertisements, this sense of gender was even more involved, as clothing itself was strictly gendered. Standards of masculinity and femininity are visible throughout these advertisements both in terms of the bodies shown and in the clothing they were advertising. As clothing is meant to be worn, these advertisements often included depictions of the body through generalized normates. As the images in newspaper advertisements throughout this period were most commonly illustrations, illustrators had much more ability to epitomize bodies in congruence with broader social standards. Analysis of clothing advertisements and the rendering of the body therefore offers additional insight to the cultural perceptions of the body.

Standards of femininity have always been susceptible to change, and this was no different in the decades leading to the 1920s. In the mid nineteenth century, hegemonic beauty standards for women centered on a sickly, thin, and pale aesthetic inspired by victims of tuberculosis, with tightly cinched corsets and full skirts. By the 1880s, this consumptive aesthetic gave way to the lower class look of full figured, bawdy women, who were much sturdier than their previous standard. Then by the 1890s, Charles Dana Gibson's drawing of the "Gibson Girl" came to redefine femininity. Combining elements of previous styles into something new, the Gibson Girl was slender but athletic, maintaining a small waist with full hips and breasts, and was often portrayed as an emancipated woman able to bike, work, and participate in society at large. However, after the end of the first world war, feminine standards once again shifted to the iconic image of the flapper, centering on a boyish figure with short, loose-fitting dresses, bobbed hairstyles, and painted faces (Mazur, 1986).

With each transition of fashionable aesthetic, came differing expectations for how women cared for and attempted to change the shape of their bodies. To meet these changes, many women

changed their diets, undergarments, and routines, but this was not a uniform experience across demographics. The transition to the flapper aesthetic was about more than boyish figures and cropped hair, it brought with it relatively radical changes in what was considered appropriate behavior for women. While previous iterations of ideal femininity maintained a maternal tone, highlighting the secondary sex characteristics in the full hips and breasts, the flapper was an extreme departure from women's reproductive potential. Rather, the flapper was a young, often vapid, woman who spent her time in dance halls rather than raising a family. This aesthetic liberation of women from motherhood toward a nonreproductive sexuality was a radical transition that likely seemed inaccessible to many women. However, the flapper took over daily print media almost instantaneously through advertisements and illustrations, bringing the flapper from the streets of high society into local communities (Adams et al., 2009).

In contrast, standards of masculinity centered much more consistently on men's behavior than they did on changing shapes of the body. Since the 1800s, American men's clothing has maintained a relatively consistent silhouette with broad shoulders and narrow hips and favored styles that articulated the shape of the body (Hollander, 1995). While varying levels of musculature came in and out of fashion the general shape of the masculine body stayed consistent. Rather, the ongoing crisis of masculinity centered around ways of interpreting and using the body. During the early twentieth century there were two major schools of masculinity. The first was a rugged masculinity that focused on virility, strength, and the ability to endure a strenuous life. Politicians, reformers, and budding organizations such as the YMCA and the Boy Scouts of America encouraged a return to the primal in order to fight the softening effects of overcivilization. This often meant spending more time outdoors, exercising, and encouraging these habits with their families (Bederamn, 1995). While this was a very popular vision of masculinity through this period, it is not well represented in the advertisements analyzed here.

The second mode of masculinity popular throughout this period was that of corporate businessmen. This brand of corporate masculinity highlighted male urges toward self-improvement, a no-nonsense aesthetic, and saw clothing as a way to promote professional success. This vision of masculinity was much more prominently seen in clothing advertisements because it depended greatly on corporate consumer culture. Advertisements for men's clothing, most often suits, appealed to this masculinity through assertions that the correct clothing was the secret to corporate success and that buying a new suit would improve both the look and mind of a man. Here, men's clothing, grooming, and how he carried himself was intended to reflect who the man was as an employee and demonstrate qualities like work ethic, intelligence, and bold decision making (Pendergast, 2000). However, it is important to note that dressing for success was not seen as a form of decoration like it was with the flapper. Men maintained a practical approach to clothing as embellishments on clothing, while once interpreted as a class signifier, were now considered feminine (Bordo, 1999).

Despite seeming quite opposite, men often embraced both of these schools of masculinity at the same time. Men wearing suits and working office jobs would also be active members of their local gyms or have outdoor hobbies like camping or fishing. Rather than fleeing cities for life off the grid, rugged masculinity encouraged men to actively engage with their bodies and their natural environment, while corporate masculinity paved a way for men to achieve professional success and provide for their families (Bederamn, 1995). Together, these modes of masculinity

suggested the ability for a man to perfect himself and framed this goal as the ultimate achievement (Pendergast, 2000).

## **4 VISUAL LITERACY IN PRACTICE**

Viewers constantly reinvented and give new meaning to images through analysis. The aim is to get as close to the original meaning as possible, but other interpretations are just as important because they reveal the numerous aspects of society. As seen in the study of art history, there are numerous ways to interpret, contextualize, and analyze an image. In order to capture the scope of a visual, it must be translated into the verbal and extrapolated into a recognizable context. Extracting the methodology from art history to visually analyze and contextualize components of an image into a historical framework gives insight into the function of a visual representation. Applying this methodology to print advertising establishes a guide where visual literacy can flourish as it assigns the vocabulary needed to better comprehend how the elements of an image come together to establish meaning (Tucker, 2002). A visual and historical analysis addresses the individual artistic and marketing components of advertisements. It also provides an aerial view of the impact felt from the visual media consumed on a daily basis within a historical context. These same habits of visual media consumption exist in modern society, the type of consumption has simply changed and strengthened due to technology.

There are strong visual indicators associated with the culture of early twentieth century America. The roaring twenties are known for the imagery of the youthful flapper that heralded a change in the way women dressed and asserted themselves within society. The illustrated fashion advertisements found within the pages of newspapers from the early twentieth century reflect this time of political, social, and economic change through the design choices carefully chosen by advertisers. Advertisers worked to sell products by being innovative with their advertisements in a way catered to social change while also adhering to the traditional (Berger, 2021). The visual representations provided in advertisements offer a narrow and conservative view of society with the featured figures falling into traditional gender roles. Fashion advertisements fell directly into this line of thinking as they formulaically portrayed men and women posed in an aesthetically pleasing way. Illustrations allowed for some artistic liberty to be taken as illustrators were not burdened with the need for an exact rendering of a product for an advertisement as other art forms. Instead, the illustrator for a fashion advertisement was selling the lifestyle that accompanied the purchase of a product. This also enabled ideologies and power structures, such as the gender binary with assigned roles, to seep into the ads that at first appear to be simply selling a commodity (Contois, 2023). However, once an early twentieth century fashion image is deconstructed into the basic elements of posing, value, lines, and text there is a striking contrast in the treatment of the depiction of body representation for both men and women.

### **4.1 Posing and Gender Stereotypes**

The manner in which illustrators pose the figures within a fashion advertisement is where one of the key differences between the role of men and women becomes apparent. The early twenties were noted as being a time of social change with the fashion and body standards for women reflecting the new set of ideals. Despite the movement towards women gaining more rights, their bodies were still commodified while they were regulated to the stereotypical gender roles. The

fashion advertisements during the twenties presented the “modern” woman in styles that allowed for a broader range of movement with dropped waists, raised hemlines, and “boyish” cuts. The fashion of the twenties lent itself to moving away from previous feminine ideals with androgynous athletic silhouettes coming to the forefront for women (Ford, 2022). The transition in clothing trends mirrored the social change of the early twentieth century, and it transferred this inherent meaning into the fashion advertisements. However, advertisers could not afford to alienate prospective consumers, so to balance out the radical nature of fashion trends the fashion illustrations featuring the female form were arranged in demure and nonthreatening poses. The form and posing took on qualities that were akin to a mannequin, which reinforced a woman’s position in society as a commodity to gaze upon (Conor, 2004). In these illustrated advertisements a woman was often positioned to where only her profile could be fully viewed with the face turned to the side where no direct eye contact could be made. It generated a feeling of isolated passivity as the spotlight was turned on the liveness of her shape in the items of clothing. In contrast, the man was presented in poses with a more dynamic nature where the viewer can see his facial features, and there was a feeling of movement as he had achieved peak masculinity through his apparel.

The differentiation between the handling of the female and male forms can immediately be seen when the compositions of the advertisements portray similar settings. Each of these advertisements depict a figure interacting with a mirror as they evaluate their choice of clothing (Walter Wilcox, 1923; Roussel-Robertson Co., 1925). However, there are a couple of key differences between the two advertisements. The man is illustrated to where the viewer is brought into the action of the image alongside the male as he is peering into the mirror. His image is fully reflected back to the viewer of the ad, but he retains his inherent position of power by not averting his gaze in a manner that would reduce him down to an object to be viewed. His body is his own, and his masculinity is enhanced by his attire. On the other hand, the female form is perpetually put on display for the consumption of viewers. While this female figure is drawn with characteristics that align with the trends of the flapper, she is still a representation of the feminine ideal filtered through the male gaze. The stance of the woman allows for only her profile to be evaluated by the viewer, closing off any further interaction. Instead of gazing into the mirror along with her, the viewer takes on a voyeuristic role of intruding upon a scene of a woman choosing her attire. The pose of the woman in this setting is slightly risqué with the robe falling down one shoulder of a lithe frame, but that subtlety is negated by the passivity of the figure. The visuals of the woman sink into anonymity without any distinctive or defining features outside those representing the idealized version of current fashion trends. Her body is not her own, it is a placeholder for the expectations of society. Reduced down to the pages of newspapers, the female form posed in these intimate settings replace mannequins in a storefront window.



Figure 1: Walter Wilcox. (1923, March). Yourself - this suit and the mirror [Advertisement]. *The Austin Statesman*, 51(284), p. 3.



Figure 2: Roussel-Robertson Co. (1925, January). Athena underwear [Advertisement]. *Brownwood Bulletin*, 25(88), p. 3.

## 4.2 Stylistic Choices

The value, shading, and lines implemented by the illustrators shape an advertisement into a story based on where the emphasis was placed. This mini world was constructed to sell to the prospective customer an idealized version of the world that already existed but would be



enhanced by pieces of clothing obtained from a local store (Hill, 2002). Inevitably, artistic choices were gradually associated with either the masculine or the feminine renderings of a figure, which enhanced the man's placement and diminishes that of the woman. In this ad for the "Sensational Value-Giving Event" both a male and female are represented (W. T. Farley, 1925). The viewer's eye is drawn to the male figure because there is an imbalance in the amount of detail between the two figures. The man is illustrated in motion with one leg forward and his arm raised in greeting. Already, there is a vitality associated with man's placement as he appears to be commanding the scene with his movement, and this presence is enhanced by the shading that creates an illusion of depth. The male figure undertakes a transition from an image on the page to a complete representation of a man. The female figure in this advertisement is more contained than her male counterpart. Her arms surround her body as she wraps them around her waist, and her profile is shown to the viewer as she turns towards the rest of the advertisement. There is a lack of detail added to her facial features and the outline of her frame. Her entire composition is a stylized impression of the ideal woman with delicate soft lines, painted features, bobbed hair, and clothing that lacks the same depth that was achieved in the male representation. While the essence of this clothing may be attainable at the local stores, the ideal is still that of an unattainable identity for which a woman can constantly strive. This juxtaposition between these two figures within the same advertisement exemplifies how artistic style can impact the messaging of an image. Through examination of artistic factors like line weight, shading, and detail, readers can also interpret power hierarchies. Where one figure is a fully fledged rendering, the other is a representation of an aesthetic. Additionally, considering posing allows the reader to determine who is active and who is passive within the image. Together, these concepts clearly reflect patriarchal power structures.



Figure 3: W. T. Farley. (1925, December). One dollar down gets the best values in town [Advertisement]. *Wichita Daily Times*, 19(216), p. 3.

### 4.3 Body Representation

While advertisements are not representative of society as a whole because society, gender, and identity are infinitely more complex than what is often represented in an image, they do represent the ideals of a commercialized identity people within a society are able to aim for (Rabinovitch-Fox, 2016). Illustrations grant the illustrators the ability to have complete artistic control over the visuals to fulfill the brief put forward by advertisers. This naturally leads to a lack of representation, and when examining advertisements, it is not just about what is represented but also what is missing in the representation because that is also an intentional choice. Body diversity was not completely absent from the print ads of the early twentieth century, but it was few and far between. In adhering to the flapper trend, advertisers often overlooked representation of bodies that fell outside of the trending youthful and lithe frame. When found within an ad, the body inclusivity only goes so far, and the disregard is apparent in the artistic portrayals. The figure in the advertisement for the “stout model” corset still features some of the hallmarks for fashion illustrations of the time (E. M. Scarbrough & Sons, 1922). The woman is drawn in profile with fine lines and painted features, and still does not contain the same amount of detail as an advertisement featuring men. Although, notably, she lacks the bobbed hair that is apparent in every other woman’s fashion advertisement during the twenties. This may seem to be a minor style deviation, but the bobbed hair is an important feature of the flapper’s aesthetic. The utilization of the techniques associated with femininity that are seen throughout fashion advertisements, combined with the slight alteration of the trending fashions, establishes a final appearance where the representation of the female form takes on the identity of being other. In invoking an “othering” of the body, a certain distance of unattainability is recognized before it is expanded upon between this representation of a female and the idealized female form.



Figure 4: E. M. Scarbrough & Sons. (1922, March). New “Stout Model” Corsets [Advertisement]. *The Austin Statesman*, 50(274), p. 2.

The lack of representation for body inclusivity was not exclusive to one gender. However, the effect was further reaching for women because standards of femininity depend so heavily on the shape of the body. Illustrations of the female figure rarely diverged from the standard of fine lines, demure poses, and slender frames. For the male figure there was an increase in artistic freedom because evolving standards of masculinity required changing the shape of the body much less. Therefore, the male form was not as much of a stand-in for the battleground of beauty standards and allowed play with proportions. The female form was often stylized, but it did not add in an element of humor as the illustrator was able convey through the use of other artistic styles, such as caricatures. In the advertisement for Pierpont Schendle Co. (1921), the male figures retain a full sense of masculinity through the posing, but with this caricaturizing the male form is taken less seriously as humor has been inserted into the representations (Male, 2017). There was an absence of advertisements featuring a female form caricatured to the same extent. The contrast found between the figures within these advertisements demonstrates how the form a representation takes is based upon pre-existing ideas about gender. The female figure has more restrictions than her male counterpart because women have been defined by the presentation of their bodies and the visual is connected to their identity.



Figure 5: Pierpont-Schendle Co. (1921, November). Tonight...elk, jollies, oh boy, some show! [Advertisement]. *The Marshall Morning News*, 3(1), p. 5.

#### 4.4 Advertising Copy

This discussion has focused on the purely visual aspect of an advertisement, but the imagery cannot be completely separated from the text. The advertising copy enhances the implicit meanings conveyed by the imagery. Language is never neutral when there are intentions behind every word, and in this way, images are the same. Despite the 1920s' reputation for being a time of liberation for the new woman, it was impossible for change to take place overnight, so this progress was steeped in rhetoric reinforcing gender stereotypes (Hill, 2002). In fashion advertisements a woman is often only able to be defined in relation to a man. This power



## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Visual literacy is not a new concept. The components from the idea of this type of literacy can be traced back to some of the earliest art theories as it is a fundamental part in the dialogue of understanding images. Discussions surrounding the importance of teaching visual literacy in a structured environment, outside of art education, are a relatively recent development. Visual literacy is understood as being a skill that is mostly self-taught that naturally builds due to the consistent exposure to images from infancy (Wright, 2016). It has been often overlooked as a skill requiring attention because visual literacy is often innate and culturally based. Therefore, it is difficult to have one centralized point of reference in the explanation of visual literacy when so many factors, from the scientific to the artistic, contribute to the refinement of this skill (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2020). While it is a skill that can be developed outside of the classroom, individual development does not guarantee the tools essential to critical thinking or comprehension of the implications of an image will also grow. A weakness in the ability to critically analyze an image is detrimental because a superficial reading or uninformed interpretation of an image can lead to miscommunications, and in turn the spread of misinformation.

The structure of a society is based on the principles found within the pages of primary resources like newspapers. Those structures have not disappeared from the news as the newspaper industry has transformed into a digital format with images taking on a dominant role in the communication of information. Pictorial representations of power dynamics are often passively consumed and accepted. These are not new insights because visuals, visual order, and visual culture have been important parts of humanity and society (Newman & Ogle, 2019). The influx of primary resources, such as newspapers, on digital platforms presents an opportunity to integrate the development of visual literacy skills with historical images. Newspaper advertisements are a reinforcement of societal power structures and inform the broader historical framework. This provides a baseline to better filter through the images seen every day to apply critical thinking to their meaning. Gender roles, identity, and representation have been pervasive throughout history and on into the modernity of visual culture. America in the early twentieth century is a prime candidate upon which to build an exercise about visual literacy because it is visually rich. The 1920s are an example where societal progress existed for some, but not for all. This is reflected in the advertisements promoting the fashion of the flapper. Visual literacy involves understanding the culture in which an image was created, but it also requires knowledge of the tools and subject matter. Borrowing from the school of art history and considering visual elements like composition, posing, line weight, shading, detail, and proportion can empower students to decode images and their messages. Historical media, such as newspapers, provide an opportunity to study imagery within a historical and visual context that allows for this expansion of knowledge.

The value in the development of visual literacy skills will only strengthen with time as communication becomes increasingly visually based. The ability to “read” an image was once seen as a skill needed primarily by those working with the visual arts. There has been steady movement throughout academia to meet the rising need of taught visual comprehension skills, but it is still not yet fully realized as its own skill in need of integration into curriculum because it is considered as an innate part of the process of interacting with visual media (Michelson,

2017). However, seeing is not always believing and the process of passive visual media intake needs to be more intensely addressed. At this point in time, visual literacy is acknowledged as an important multifaceted area of study and has shown to be actively applied in some institutions. The majority of research written about visual literacy were in relation to projects and lessons information professionals have put into practice. This ranges from art exhibits to photos from social media being recontextualized within the framework of classroom exercises (Barrett, 2003; Finch, 2015; Wright, 2016). Contextualizing these illustrated visual representations within a historical framework and visually analyzing the different elements of an image brings another view of history into focus and highlights the importance of developing the vocabulary required to interpret imagery in an increasingly visually based culture.

## References

- Adams, K.H., Keene, M.L., & McKay, M. (2009). *Controlling representations: Depictions of women in a mainstream newspaper, 1900-1950*. Hampton Press, Inc.
- Alexander, R. (2021). *Imagining gender, nation and consumerism in magazines of the 1920s*. Anthem Press.
- Avgerinou, M. D., & Pettersson, R. (2020). Visual literacy theory: Moving forward. In: Josephson, S., Kelly, J., & Smith, K. (Eds.), *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media* (2nd ed., pp. 433-464). Routledge. <https://doi-org.libproxy.library.unt.edu/10.4324/9780429491115>
- Bederman, G. (1995). *Manliness and civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880-1917*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Barrett, T. (2003). Interpreting visual culture. *Art Education (Reston)*, 56(2), 7-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2003.11653486>
- Berger, A. A. (2021). *Ads, fads, and consumer culture: Advertising's impact on American character and society* (6th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bordo, S. (1999). *The male body: A new look at men in public and in private*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Conor, L. (2004). *The spectacular modern woman: Feminine visibility in the 1920s*. Indiana University Press.
- Contois, E. J. H. (2023). Gender and advertising: Representations of femininities, masculinities, and nonbinary identities. *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, 24(1). <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2023.a898059>
- Davis, S.W. (2019). Reprint retrospective: "Complex little femmes": Adwomen and the female consumer. *Advertising & Society Quarterly*, 20(4). <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2019.0028>

- E. M. Scarbrough & Sons. (1922, March). New “Stout Model” Corsets [Advertisement]. *The Austin Statesman*, 50(274), 2.
- Finch, J. (2015). Visual literacy and art history: Teaching images and objects in digital environments. In: Baylen, D., & D'Alba, A. (Eds.), *Essentials of teaching and integrating visual and media literacy* (pp. 251-264). Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05837-5\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-05837-5_13)
- Ford, R. T. (2022). *Dress codes: how the laws of fashion made history* (First Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition). Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. Harvard University Press.
- Hill, D. D. (2002). *Advertising to the American woman, 1900-1999*. Ohio State University Press.
- Hollander, A. (1995). *Sex and suits: The evolution of modern dress*. Kodansha International.
- Lears, J. (1994). *Fables of abundance: A cultural history of advertising in America*. Basic Books.
- Male, A. (2017). *Illustration: A theoretical and contextual perspective* (2nd ed.). London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.
- Mazur, A. (1986). U.S. trends in feminine beauty and overadaptation. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 22(4), 281-303.
- McGovern, C.F. (2006). *Sold American: Consumption and citizenship, 1890-1945*. The University of North Carolina Press,
- Michelson, A. (2017). A short history of visual literacy: The first five decades. *Art Libraries Journal*, 42(2), 95-98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/alj.2017.10>
- Newman, M., & Ogle, D. (2019). *Visual literacy: Reading, thinking, and communicating with visuals*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pendergast, T. (2000). *Creating the modern man: American magazines and consumer culture 1900-1950*. University of Missouri Press.
- Pierpont-Schendle Co. (1921, November). Tonight...elk, jollies, oh boy, some show! [Advertisement]. *The Marshall Morning News*, 3(1), 5.
- Rabinovitch-Fox, E. (2016). Baby, you can drive my car: Advertising women’s freedom in 1920s America. *American Journalism*, 33(4), 372–400. doi:10.1080/08821127.2016.1241641

- Roussel-Robertson Co. (1925, January). Athena underwear [Advertisement]. *Brownwood Bulletin*, 25(88), 3.
- Scanlon, J. (2020). I am what I make up: Reading women's roles in advertising across a century. *Advertising & Society Quarterly* 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2020.0008>
- The Wolff & Marx Co. (1924, February). Woman now flatters man by adopting his tailor mode [Advertisement]. *The San Antonio Light*, 44(29), 5.
- Thomson, R.G. (1997). *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. Columbia University Press.
- Tucker, A. (2002). *Visual literacy: Writing about art*. McGraw-Hill.
- W. T. Farley. (1925, December). One dollar down gets the best values in town [Advertisement]. *Wichita Daily Times*, 19(216), 3.
- Walter Wilcox. (1923, March). Yourself - this suit and the mirror [Advertisement]. *The Austin Statesman*, 51(284), 3.
- Wright, P. (2016). Seeing is believing. Or is it?: Visual literacy in art & design education. *Art Libraries Journal*, 41(1), 32–39. doi:10.1017/alj.2015.6