

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The American mother: A feminist analysis of the Kleenex® “Get-Mommed” campaign

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Winter of 2009 proved a lucrative season for cold and flu marketers. Little was known regarding the H1N1 flu virus, and news outlets warned consumers of lackluster guards against germs. Many businesses began to capitalize on this fear. Williams (2011) explained how hand sanitizers and disinfectant products raised 54% during this time. One such example is a commercial that ran on American television during the 2009 holiday season, which advertised Kleenex® brand tissues. This commercial portrayed a grown man, sick with a cold, going door to door searching for an idealized mother figure to care for him. In addition to these televised commercials, Kleenex® also developed an online ‘Get-Mommed’ campaign ([www.getmommed.com](http://www.getmommed.com)), where users could choose between eight fictional nurturing mothers to care for them as they recover from a cold or flu virus. Among these fictional mothers were Latino mom, Ana Maria, who spoke of nothing but her enormous family; Asian mom, Sue, who scolded users for being late and acting like a child; Debutant mom, Magnolia, who declared herself as a true Southern girl; hippy mom, Amber, who believed in natural healing and motivating through kindness; the much younger blonde mom (most of the other mothers appeared as though they could realistically be parents to a middle-aged grown man), Jessica, who declared that she’s more of a friend than a mom; and Jewish mom, Phyllis, who enjoyed cooking, laundry and buying presents, “Because if you’re happy, than I’m happy”. Not much was similar between these mothers besides their insistence of using Kleenex® brand tissue products.

**Key words:** Feminine representations, online marketing, campaign analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to explore the Kleenex® Get-Mommed campaign through a textual analysis. A textual analysis is an appropriate methodology for this research because rather than looking at the frequency of audience reception, it is instead interested in the themes and underlying messages of the content. These patterns contribute to how audiences construct their own personal narrative.

The textual analysis will be completed through a feminist perspective. Modelski (1982) explains how popular-culture texts provide a deeper understanding of the issues women face. These problem-solving structures illustrate meaningful relationships regarding how problems are configured in the society at large. Gender roles and gender identity are constantly being created, recreated and negotiated through media representations (Wood, 1994). These representations then shape a woman’s view of herself and society’s view of her (Ferguson, 1983). This is also true in campaigns, such as

the Kleenex® campaign, concerning what it means to be a mother in American society.

This analysis is completed through a feminist perspective to better explore the cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman (Jackson and Jones, 1998). By exploring media depictions of these fictional Kleenex® mothers, a deeper understanding is gained of what it means to be a mother in American culture. These representations are telling depictions of gender and racial statures that exist in culture today.

## Beauty and Kleenex®

In 1920, Kimberly-Clark developed a paper manufacturer, which eventually led to the creation of Kleenex® facial tissue (Kleenex, 2010). “In 1925, the first Kleenex® tissue ad appeared in the Ladies home journal showing “the new secret of keeping a pretty skin as used by famous movie stars...” Soon, advertisements were being carried

by all the major women's magazines, including McCall's, good housekeeping, Harper's Bazaar, vogue, cosmopolitan and Redbook." Research has demonstrated how advertisements in women's magazines have presented an artificial world where women achieve fulfillment through consumption of consumer goods (McCracken, 1993; Steiner, 1995 and Walker, 2000). Advertisements are able to construct a world where women are able to achieve their desired cultural status (that is, successful homemaker) by buying consumer products. This fulfillment of cultural expectations will lead towards a seemingly happier and more fulfilling life.

In 1927, the Kleenex® advertisements began featuring "famous stars of stage and screen for testimonials and endorsements. The "beautiful people" were confessing that Kleenex® tissue was one of their secrets" (Kleenex, 2010). This suggests that everyday users could become more beautiful too with the simple purchase of the Kleenex® product. Clearly, Kleenex® has long tried to link its consumer product with the branding of femininity and beauty.

Today, the Kleenex® product is the number one brand of facial tissue and is recognized by families in more than 150 countries across the world (Kleenex®, 2010). During the 2009 holiday season, Kleenex® launched an online "Get-Mommed" campaign ([www.getmommed.com](http://www.getmommed.com)), where users could choose between eight fictional nurturing mothers to care for them as they recover from a cold or flu virus.

Through a myriad of television, online and poster advertisements, audiences were urged to log online to the "Get-Mommed" campaign website at [www.getmommed.com](http://www.getmommed.com). Additionally, a fan club (currently with 119 fans) was initiated on the social networking site on Facebook. Once users visit the "Get-Mommed" campaign website, they were prompted to explore and listen to clips of eight fictional mothers who will care for them as they recover from a cold or flu virus. The idea being that we do not all have a mother, or the right kind of mother, to help us get through illnesses. Each of these virtual mothers proved different from one another, and these differences in nurturing styles were demonstrated through these small clips.

### **The American mother**

Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin and Lydenberg's (1999) research demonstrates how women construct themselves in relationship to others. Not only do women turn towards other women in their lives for guidance on how to construct their own lives, but they also turn towards popular media representations. Media is able to provide a story where "a similar lesson, theme or structure pattern is resembled, recycled and re-taught" (Levine, 2006). By examining these media depictions, one gains a sense of

the culture of which it is produced. If audiences are members of that culture, these recycled stories become the norm for which individuals strive. This process is known as hegemony.

Durham and Kellner (2005) explain how as long as the ruling class holds control over the means of production, their ideological dominance will be perpetuated through media texts. Culture is made up of a "set of discourses, stories, images, spectacles and varying cultural forms and practices that generate meaning, identities and political effects" (xiv). By turning towards these artifacts, one gains a better sense of the dominant institutions ways of life. It is only natural for all members of that society to adhere and strive towards those standards, as they are presented as the norm. "There is no pure entertainment that does not contain representations, often extremely prejudicial, of class, gender, race, sexuality, and myriad social categories and groupings" (xiv).

In short, media depictions are able to provide a sense of how to live appropriately within a society. These representations are just one piece of the values and ideologies within the culture. "The omnivorous mass media of television, films, records, and radio absorb and engulf all kinds of folk themes and formulas, to spew them out to their giant audiences in a cultural feedback" (Dorson, p. 41). Each piece represents similar structure and content that tell of the way we live.

Research demonstrates how media extends messages that may be counteractive to the advancement of women. For example, media depictions showcase how "women categorically "are" certain things, for example, no matter their age; they are "hot girls," not self-aware or intelligent adults" (Pozner, 2004). Media is able to perpetuate harmful stereotypes regarding the role and importance of women in culture. Audiences are drawn to these depictions because they are able to "compare their domestic lives favourably and perhaps note how they too can transcend the limits and conflicts inherent in their domestic relationships and material circumstances. Given this formula, the search for social explanations for these conflicts appears pointless, for again and again, regardless of class, profession, race, or any other social category" (Brancato, 2007). Based on this knowledge, this study aims to explore media depictions of the fictional virtual Kleenex "Get-Mommed" mothers to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a mother in American culture. This will be completed through a textual analysis.

### **METHODOLOGY**

As previously noted, a textual analysis is an appropriate methodology for this research because it is not interested in looking at the frequency of audience reception. Instead, it is interested in

the themes and underlying messages of the content. By examining these patterns, one is able to have a better understanding of how audiences construct their own personal narrative. It is important to understand that what is of interest is not the text itself, but what the text signifies (Curtin, 1995). This is accomplished through the identification of the most salient themes, and then linking those themes together (Bernard, 2000).

Many other researchers have examined advertising campaigns through the use of a textual analysis. Balaji and Worawongs (2010) examined relationships between Asian females and white males in television advertisements through the use of a textual analysis. Results of this study suggest that Asian females are presented as being subservient to white males. Echchaibi (2008) examined website advertising through a textual analysis to demonstrate how web and satellite television are facilitating a fundamental diffusion of Islam religious knowledge and authority. Additionally, Roedl (2008) utilized a textual analysis to examine whether the Dove beauty brand campaign is consistent with their mission of societal change and widening the societal definition of beauty.

Each of these studies examined advertisements to see how patterns and representations provide illustrations of a society at large. Similarly, this study is interested in how representations of virtual moms in the Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" campaign demonstrates what it means to be a mother in American society. Included in this textual analysis was the initial campaign commercial that ran during the 2009 holiday season, the official campaign website, [www.getmommed.com](http://www.getmommed.com), and additional online discourse surrounding the campaign, such as its fan page on [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).

### Campaign interpretation

At face, the Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" campaign may seem like a positive depiction of the individualistic nature of female gender roles. Research has often criticized media depictions for presenting the female as a single uniform unit. Not only were all women presented with different personalities and styles, but it also was based on the idea that women fulfill the role of a mother very differently from one another. However, a closer reading of this website does demonstrate some of the possible problematic interpretations of this campaign.

Research demonstrates how the very act of choosing from a group of women is dehumanizing (Roedl, 2008). The assumption of this type of campaign is that there are qualities about some women that make them better than others. Because this website provides little substance about each woman other than appearance, it is likely that these women are being judged by superficial characters. It also puts women in a subversive role, where they are incapable of being whole on their own, and need someone else to "choose them" in order to validate their role in society.

By providing eight different options for types of American mothers, the "Get-Mommed" website is providing women with an assortment of possibilities for personal character identification. This is increasingly important, as Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin and Lydenberg's (1999) research demonstrates the ways in which women identify with characters and then construct themselves in relation to others. This attachment includes the guidance of media representations. Unfortunately, these second sound clips of each personality leaves little for users to make their decision based off of besides appearances alone.

As a white woman in my mid-twenties, I naturally found myself drawn to the virtual younger blonde mom, Jessica. She was the only mother who, based on appearance, could not realistically be old enough to be the mother of the original middle-aged grown man

who was going door to door in search of a mother in the television commercial.

Jessica's character declared how she's much more of a friend than a mom. However, not much substance to the character was given besides this sound bite. The other white female options were the Debutant Magnolia, who declares herself as a true southern girl, and Amber, who believed in natural healing and motivating through kindness. Both of these characters were presented as incredibly nurturing and passive figureheads. These representations proved very distant from the alternative non-white character options.

Asian mom, Sue, immediately scolds users for being late and acting like a child. Lisa, the African American mother proves the sassiest character and comes complete with a tracksuit and power tools. Gabbadon (2006) demonstrates how African-American media representations are significantly more likely to show tension and engage in assertive power. These representations were critical in the way audiences "determine how they will interpret, and perform in their world. Moreover, this research explains how reintroduced old stereotypes are able to gain popularity when presented to a new generation of Americans. Media is able to provide a story where "a similar lesson, theme or structure pattern is resembled, recycled and re-taught" (Levine, 2006). The Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" campaign is a clear demonstrate of this phenomenon.

For example, beautiful Latino mom, Ana Maria, utilized her few second clip to talk about her large Latino family. Ana Maria fits deeply held stereotypes of Latina women in American pop culture. "Depictions have been uni-dimensional relegating Latina actresses to perform mostly spittfires, maids, and self-sacrificing mothers. These representations usually adhere to a very specific construction of an "authentic" Latina body" (Baez, 2008). If a Latino user were to visit the Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" website, it would be very clear of what makes a Latino mother different from a white mother.

Through a close reading of all of the Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" options, it was clear that users would easily be able to distinguish one virtual mother from one another in order to make their decision. In fact, based on the characters outfits (fifties housewife dress for Phyllis and a black business suit for Sue) one could most likely fill in each character's narration without ever clicking on their sound bite. This categorization was made easier by the campaigns use of old narratives and stereotypes held in American culture. Brancata (2007) explains how media is able to indoctrinate women into traditional gender roles. These roles are often based on their ethnic background, as clearly demonstration through a closer examination of basic narrative structure, premises, and ideological assumptions. Not only does Kleenex® tell users how to be a mother, but they provide clear depictions of how to be a proper Jewish mother or proper African American mother.

As previously discussed, this analysis also included online rhetoric surrounding the campaign, including the Facebook fan club site. One such comment demonstrates how problematic the act of choosing one of these virtual "correct" mothers proves. One commenter states, "I absolutely LOVE this whole idea of getmommed! I know so many people with either really bad moms or no mom at all, and it's perfect for them" (Facebook, 2010). While one cannot argue that every child does not grow up with a "good" mother, the Kleenex® "Get-mommed" campaign does provide a model regarding how mothers should act. Though each mother holds various idiosyncrasies that separate one from another, it is their similarities that Kleenex® presents as the norm for all "good" American mothers, regardless of ethnic background.

Perhaps the most troubling stereotype perpetuated in the Kleenex® "Get Mommed" campaign is the premise that only females can fulfill the role as a nurturer. While an alternative reading of this campaign may suggest that it is meant to be ironic or

utilize tongue-and-cheek humor, it does say something about our society that not a single male exists anywhere on the website, aside from the grown man, sick with a cold, going door to door searching for an idealized mother figure to care for him in the initial campaign commercial. Moreover, the virtual mothers on the website all find fulfillment and joy in taking over this nurturing role, regardless of who it is that they are nurturing.

For example, the virtual Jewish mom, Phyllis, enjoys cooking, laundry and buying presents, "Because if you're happy, than I'm happy". No matter how different each of these mothers prove from one another, the one universal characteristic of mothers is that there is nothing else they would rather be doing than taking care of someone else.

As each character begs you to choose them as your virtual mother, the assumption is that taking care of others would provide them with personal self satisfaction and happiness, provided that this is done by utilizing Kleenex® products, of course. Since men obviously do not feel this same "need" and "desire" to nurture others, it is unrealistic to expect them to contribute to these roles in a real-life household setting.

Hochschild (2003) would label these depictions as a hypersymbolization of the mother, explaining that "as the market advances, the family moves from a production to a consumption unit, as it faces a care deficit, as the cultural landscape of care shifts, individuals increasingly keep an anxious eye on what seems like the primary remaining symbol of abiding care-the mother. The more the commodity frontier erodes the territory surrounding the emotional role of the wife and mother, the more hypersymbolized the remaining sources of care seem to become."

Perhaps the clearest message of the "Get-Mommed" campaign is that every good mother instinctively knows to use Kleenex® brand tissues to fight the common flu and cold. Not only is it her role and duty in society to do so, the use of any other brand would mean that a mother does not care as deeply for their sick child. Moreover, the subsequent television commercial that portrays a grown man, sick with a cold, going door to door searching for an idealized mother figure to care for him, demonstrates that a woman's responsibility does not stop with her children. This campaign is a reflection of today's mother who is expected to "do it all". Johnston and Swanson (2006) explain how today's mothers alter their construction of intensive mothering expectations with the demands of their employment. Modern working women are expected to take on all of the same responsibilities of a stay-at-home mother because it brings them joy to do so.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" campaign through a textual analysis. The textual analysis was completed through a feminist perspective, as popular-culture texts provide a deeper understanding of the issues women face (Modelski, 1982). These representations provide problem-solving illustrations of how meaningful relationships form and how problems are configured in the society at large.

Therefore, this study was interested on how the Kleenex® campaign depicts what it means to be a mother in American society. By exploring media depictions of these fictional Kleenex® mothers, a deeper understanding is gained of what it means to be a mom in American culture. The most salient message presented in the Kleenex® campaign is that mothers are just waiting to

be chosen, so that they may have an opportunity to nurture others, including grown men. These representations are telling depictions of gender and racial inequities that still exist today.

Advertisement campaigns change as quickly as seasons, and since its winter of 2009 release date, the Kleenex® "Get-Mommed" campaign has since been terminated. The website now reads, "The worst of cold 'N Flu season is over...The weather is warmer and spring has arrived! This means that the moms at Get Mommed said their goodbyes on March 31st. We hope that the Kleenex® brand virtual Moms could provide you with some extra mothering this winter, and maybe even a smile or two" (Kleenex®, 2010).

Though this campaign was far from perfect, it was comforting to see an older age group of women finally getting media attention, as elder generations are often subject to sexism, ageism, or worse, ignored all together. It seems as though the "Get-Mommed" campaign is accountable for all three of these offenses now that the virtual mothers have done their jobs by nurturing us through the flu season. They are now free to disappear and be ignored until we need them again next year.

Fortunately, Kleenex® has launched its newer summer "Experience the release" campaign, because "it feels good to feel" (Kleenex®, 2010). This promotion presents women in a much more positive light, as it provides them with a role other than that of a nurturer and secondary supportive role in society. The new campaign reads, "Sharing your feelings is good for the mind and great for the soul. Here you can see how others have experienced the release, show your appreciation for their memories, and share memories of your very own. Whether you want to read a good story or tell one, we're ready for you to experience the release" (Kleenex®, 2010).

While these advertisements are still targeted towards the lucrative older female market, it does much more than perpetuate unrealistic beauty and societal standards for women. Moreover, it takes away from the notion that by purchasing Kleenex®, one will become younger, happier and more beautiful. Rather, this campaign provides a space for females to hold positive conversations about themselves or other females.

This study was based on the presumption that media representations are an illustration of society at large, and that Kleenex® campaigns depict what it means to be a mother in American society. The newer Kleenex® "Experience the release" showcases American woman as supportive, independent and strong individuals-a much more realistic depiction of the role women play in American society.

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