

# American Ad-Women, Rhetoric, and Professional Identity in a Canadian College of Engineering

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In my 2007 article “Jim Pankiw: Telling It Like It Is,” I argue that Canada’s rhetorical culture is filled with contradictions and complexities. The cluster of social values that are woven into patterns of Canadian identity–discourse include a respect for diversity, multiculturalism, inclusiveness, justice, peace, order, and collectivism. These values function as “ideographs” which, as McGee explains, take on the force of a “logical commitment . . . [and of] an accurate empirical description” (7). However, when these ideographs are deployed in political and professional contexts, their ideographic values can have an ugly underside, as they do in the political pamphlets that Jim Pankiw circulated in Saskatchewan in his bid to become an independent Member of Parliament in 2004. Pankiw’s pamphlets demonstrate how the complexities of Canadian identity are perpetuated through the ideographs that circulate in Canadian mass media. Further, the pamphlets reveal how the most common values of Canadian identity are sometimes invoked and perverted to advocate policies and ideas that many people would consider to be contrary to Canadian values. In short, Pankiw’s pamphlets

exemplified how social harmony and tolerance, justice, economic health, and civility—all values that Canadians embrace—can be deployed in sexist and racist ways.

Similarly, in 2014, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative government pledged to institute a “barbaric cultural practices” hotline, as though the 9-1-1 emergency number would not serve for reporting medical emergencies or criminal activities in progress. With its loaded language, the phrase “barbaric cultural practices” invited an emotional response, but Harper never offered any indication of what those “practices” might constitute. Instead, the “hotline” ideas used the ideography of “social harmony” to stifle Canadian commitment to diversity and to retard an appreciation and respect for cultural differences.

More recently, in July 2018, Conservative leadership hopeful Kellie Leitch proposed screening immigrants for “anti-Canadian values,” thereby begging the question of “What defines ‘anti-Canadian’ values?” Even more recently, the Conservatives pulled an attack ad that featured a black man pulling a suitcase, apparently across the Canadian border. The headline of the Twitter-feed ad blamed a tweet by Prime Minister Trudeau for Canada’s “immigration crisis” (CBC). So on one hand, Canadians value the ideographs of social harmony and inclusiveness, but on the other, Canadian political policy contradicts Canadian values.

The overall arc of the above discussion, therefore, is that while various authorities in Canada posit a stable Canadian identity based on narrowly-defined characteristics, a national identity is not monolithic and cannot be simplified and reduced. In fact, this push to engineer social harmony by creating a false standard of civil behaviour directs Canadians to embrace an “us/them” dichotomy and to abandon our commitment to collectivism.

### **Identity-Forming Strategies and Collective Action**

Collectivism, a theme relevant to Canadian identity, has inspired my research about women's clubs within the American advertising industry. Collectivism is evocative of what historian Nancy Cott claims is crucial to what came to be called "the feminist movement." Cott notes that "[f]eminism posits that women perceive themselves not only as a biological sex but (perhaps even more importantly) as a social grouping . . . The conviction that women's socially constructed position situates [women] on shared ground enables consciousness and the community of action among women to impel change" (5). Annette Baxter, in her preface to Karen Blair's book *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, explores the historical consciousness of "sisterhood," noting the significance of collectivism when she claims that "sisterhood is an ideal long dormant and now once again alive," calling it a "drama of self-discovery re-enacted, a faith in womanhood reawakened, and an historical consciousness repossessed" (xi).

My research expands upon the scholarship of collective action through club work, analyzing the identity-forming strategies of professional women working in the advertising business between the years of 1912-1950. The first advertising club exclusively for women was the New York League of Advertising Women, formed in 1912. My work examines the ad-women's contributions to persuasion and identification in a context constrained by gendered expectations of professional behaviour and competence. I am drawn to study women working in advertising because of my own history as a radio advertising copywriter. While working in radio, I found my way into the academy and interdisciplinary studies driven by my interest in women's history, writing, and rhetorical activity. My research on women's advertising clubs and professional identity revealed a contradiction: these women gained access to a male-dominated industry, enjoying membership in the industry based on their socio economic position in the world. They maintained exclusivity of the clubs by limiting membership. Clearly, the women wielded power, yet their activities—described in club records and in publications written by

individual members—revealed two key elements of identity and professional membership: first, women were, in fact, not recognized as equal to their male counterparts in advertising, and second, they, in turn, guarded access to the membership in their professional clubs.

The women's seemingly contradictory stances of privilege and oppression can be understood through intersectionality—a theoretical framework that reveals how privilege and oppression work together to constrain professional women's rhetoric. Moreover, "intersectionality posits that multiple social categories intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social structural level" (Launius and Hassel 114–115). Intersectionality provides a lens through which the rhetorical strategies of women in advertising can be examined. While the advertising women no doubt suffered gender-based oppression, they participated in their own oppression and the oppression of others. They participated in a puzzling dynamic of ideographs and rhetorical strategies that both celebrated and circumscribed the success possible for women in the professional workplace. For example, advertising women joined clubs that helped them to assume a collective power at a social level. However, the clubs needed the individual success of the women to make an impact in advertising and build an exclusive ambiance for club membership. Further, many of the club members insisted that ad-women's talents were inborn and exclusive to their gendered experience. This line of thought led to essentialist characterizations of professional ad-women and may have resulted in limiting women's advance into executive positions in advertising agencies.

### **Rhetorical Strategies of Men and Women in Advertising**

In my 2011 dissertation *Rhetorical Motives in Advertising: A Theory of Advertising as Religious Discourse*, I used metaphorical criticism to uncover the motives in the memoirs of American advertising men writing between 1890 and 1940. These male memoir-writers were constructing rhetorical

identities that placed them as the heroes of their own stories. The men whom business historians recognize as building the advertising industry in America—Claude Hopkins, Earnest Elmo Calkins, and Albert Lasker—saw themselves as heroes of business and nation. Their ideographic representations emphasized ad-men’s individuality and exceptionalism. In part, the men were persuading audiences of their legitimacy as advertising professionals and of the legitimacy of advertising itself. The men adapted various themes from heroic narratives, weaving them into narratives that made advertising a force of nature that needed priests, navigators, and scientists to wield it effectively and safely and to its full potential for the good of—and in aid of—consumers, producers, and the country. The ad-men claimed those roles for themselves.

Like the ad-men, advertising women also had to persuade audiences of the ad-woman’s legitimacy as a business professional; however, ad-women positioned themselves as representative of the “every woman.” They claimed expertise in domesticity by virtue of their gender, as though homemaking were part of a woman’s DNA. In fact, many of the most successful ad-women never married. And so, in brief, the men are traditional heroes, overcoming adversity, single-handedly and individualistically conquering any challenge with virile masculinity. They are not “every man.” They are exceptional men. They are the “great men of history.” They are not intimately connected to place. They position themselves as masters of their universe. On the other hand, the women did not typically tout their exceptionality. Rather, they more frequently claimed to be “every woman,” trying to be the best wives, best mothers, and best caregivers that they could be.

Trying to be the “best,” both domestically and professionally, resulted in very few advertising women writing and publishing memoirs. Rather, advertising club records would serve as memoirs of the women’s careers as a whole. These club records reveal that the advertising women claimed their identity as business people first and foremost while their nurturing

impulses of collaboration and support for each other were secondary, a hierarchical pattern of identity in their determination to achieve both career and economic success.

### **Intersections of Gender and Professional Identity**

My scholarly interests focus on the rhetorical strategies of women working in advertising from 1912 to 1940 and on how they negotiated professional identities in a male-dominant and male-dominated industry. For starters, these ad-women were most often privileged and educated women, white and mostly middle class. Their advertising clubs were also exclusive: potential members had to be sponsored by current members; they had to be voted in by the membership. They had to be working in advertising, either in an executive position or in a creative position. Clerical workers were not allowed. Further, no archival evidence suggests women of colour were members of these advertising clubs, at least, not before 1940. And so although the advertising women were privileged both economically and socially, they were constrained by gender expectations. As discussed earlier, in some texts and documents, the women's sense of identity as "woman" was secondary to their sense of identity as professionals. However, clearly, professionalism was engendered and the ethos of Professional men only appeared to be gender-free. Notably, the notions of "professional competency" were created and preserved by men in the profession. As a result, the ad-women had the rhetorical task of claiming professional competency based mainly on their gender.

The women's rhetorical contributions to business are articles they authored and published in trade journals, magazines, and newspapers. These records show women advocating for women in the profession, organizing professional development opportunities, and celebrating women's successes in the industry itself. The publications and club records reinforce that ad-women felt constrained by their gender but they used gender as a rhetorical strategy to legitimize their competence in advertising. The women resisted oppressive working cultures using rhetorical strategies of subversion,

paradox, and self-deprecation. These strategies were often self-destructive, but they exerted an influence that helped women join the professional ranks of the advertising industry.

The identities of advertising women were products of their time and social context, operating at the intersection of gender and professional identity. Women like Jane Martin, third president of the Women's Advertising League of New York, and Dorothy Dignam, a lifelong advertising woman, advocated for women's careers in advertising. However, by virtue of their gender, these women's careers and livelihoods depended on their ability to earn the trust of the people who owned the agencies and companies where they were employed. Therefore, the ad-women could not obviously disrupt the status quo in their advocacy for women in advertising. Rather, they had to demonstrate professional ethos, which included demonstrating good judgement (but business first), goodwill (make money for the employer), and good character (demonstrate competence). Unlike other female political activists of the time, these advertising women were invested in maintaining the class and social systems in which they were embedded.

### **Gender and Professional Identity: Empowering and Excluding**

Presently, my research explores identity-building by examining the archival records of individual women. For example, "Dorothy Dignam's Advocacy for Women's Careers in advertising 1920 – 1950" (Wills) examines how women—in particular Dignam—working in the advertising industry during the 1920s to the 1960s, both encouraged and resisted stereotypes about women so that they could establish women's professional ethos. This approach provided women with opportunities for professional development and network building. Dorothy Dignam is presented as a case study of one such advertising woman. She was a market researcher, a teacher, an advocate for women's employment in advertising, a historian of women's advertising clubs, and a supporter of and contributor to women's professional networking. Dignam's career strategies helped her to construct a professional identity that situated her as a guide, teacher, and role model

for other women who worked in advertising. She created and supported an attitude that enabled aspiring career women to embark on a career in advertising.

Dignam was also instrumental in developing a curriculum and textbook for use in the women's clubs' professional development. Dignam's career and her lifelong professional involvement with women's advertising clubs served a rhetorical purpose: to change the attitudes of both men and women toward the professional woman. She explained to men why women in advertising were necessary, and she encouraged women not to be intimidated by any job in advertising.

My article "A Woman's Place: Career Success and Early 20th Century Women's Advertising Clubs" (2017) explores how women's advertising clubs and successful advertising women worked in tandem to reinforce and affirm the necessity of each other. They turned oppression into epistemic advantage, but at the same time, the club members helped only other women who were like them. The clubs excluded other women in order to keep their own professional identities "pure."

Archival information on various women's advertising clubs is available, but these documents need to be assembled into a coherent discussion of professional identity formation. This research is key to identifying the specific strategies and processes that the women deployed to convince their male colleagues in both advertising and business to accept—and even to request—their contributions to the industry. By examining the documents of women's advertising clubs, I am able to construct a picture of ad-women's professional identities. This process can help spotlight the significance of the careers of historical advertising women.

Women's roles in advertising have been understood primarily as those of consumers. This stereotype does an injustice to their long history as producers of advertising. Unlike their male counterparts, ad-women have not been recognized for their contributions as business leaders, entrepreneurs, and professional mentors. Advertising women's professional



lives have been largely neglected while advertising men's published memoirs and how-to instruction books on advertising are still used by marketing historians. Yet, ad-women's rhetorical strategies may have import for other women working in male-dominated industries. Indeed, the women involved in building the ad-women's clubs are only now winning recognition for their leadership acumen (Wills and Raven, forthcoming). My research helps us to understand the professional roles that women played in building business culture and the business culture of advertising. Thus, my work offers a more complete history of advertising that will hopefully encourage further scholarship into women's contributions to business and to their professional identity-building strategies. These advertising women built professional ethos and gained acceptance in the advertising business even in a time when American women still did not have the vote.

### **Significance of Teaching Professional Communication in the College of Engineering**

I teach for the Graham School of Professional Development, located in the College of Engineering, University of Saskatchewan, where my research informs my teaching. That is, my research has validated my in-class observations about identity-building within a profession, and my in-class observations have informed and validated my research theories of identity-building. For example, one pillar of the College of Engineering's mission statement is to increase enrolment of both women and Aboriginal students. However, this task is not that simple. When institutions seek inclusive policies designed to encourage diversity, there needs to be investigation into how to change institutional cultures. To do this, professionals from marginalized groups—including women from advertising communities of the early twentieth-century—who have addressed identity-building practices can produce and provide identity-building knowledge helpful for university students from diverse backgrounds.

My research contributes to the College's mission by helping to understand how professional identity is political and both constituted and constrained by issues of gender and race. I engage my students as we examine these themes in my "Negotiation as Rhetorical Practice" class. In "Negotiation," we talk about conflict resolution, which includes, in part, analyzing the institutional structures that give rise to conflict. To examine the institutional structures that have nurtured oppression, I call on the government of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report (TRC) with its recommendations to help the nation build "a mutually-respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples" (6). The report states that for reconciliation to happen, "there has to be an awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour" (6-7). The TRC's four-point philosophy works well in conjunction with intersectionality to teach about both Indigenous people's and women's disenfranchisement.

Professional women's identities and Canadian Indigenous identities were and are complex, multifaceted, and ever-shifting. By studying the rhetorical identification strategies of advertising women, my work will contribute to understanding how oppression and silencing contribute to identity construction in marginalized groups. As faculty in the Graham School of Professional Development, College of Engineering, my research will help the institution meet its goals of recruiting and retaining women and Indigenous people in the College of Engineering. At the same time, it will help students understand processes of ethos-building in a professional context.

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