The Negative Impact of Ads on the Perception of Women

You are looking into a kitchen. The wallpaper, appliances, and oven are made in a retro, 1950s style. You encounter a woman dressed in a full-cupped purple bra and high-waisted purple briefs. Although her face is made up in red lipstick and mascara, her hair is messy and unstyled, as though you have caught her in the middle of her daily routine. She is in the process of bending over to take a turkey out of the oven, placing her rear end in full view. She is looking up at you with her mouth slightly open and her eyes wide with surprise. You are entreated to ask yourself, “Can she make you lose control?” This scene is just one example of the overtly sexy and shocking advertising that is becoming more and more pervasive in today’s society. This image is an ad for Lynx, a men’s antiperspirant, and is referencing another series of ads offering to help prevent “premature perspiration” in the presence of attractive women. The general idea seems to be that this woman whom you are watching prepare her evening meal somehow has the power, or even, as the word “make” implies, the intention, to make you “lose control” of your sexual instincts. Although sexuality in general is not dirty or wrong, and having confidence in one’s body and sensuality is important, when sexuality is exploited to advertise consumer products, the person being photographed or filmed is robbed of her power and her sexual identity. Contrary to the implications of the ad’s caption, this woman is clearly not bending over for the sake of the viewer — she is taking food out of the oven. Yet, the ad implies that she is somehow to blame for the viewer’s arousal, just by the act of being in her own kitchen in her underwear. The exploitation and manipulation of the female body in advertisement takes sexuality and transforms it, turning something that is a natural part of a woman’s identity into a commodity. In the world of commercial advertisement, the body is an object to be bought and possessed, just like the product being promoted. Advertisements strip away the identity of the bodies being shown, turning a woman into nothing more than the sum of her parts. Most importantly, advertisements strip the subjects of their sexual power; the body of the woman in the Lynx ad has now been appropriated and claimed by the brand, the photographer, and the consumer. By turning the human form into a sexual commodity, advertisements manipulate the way in which we interpret the body, and how we view and interact with each other; sexually manipulative ads reinforce negative gender stereotypes and taint the purity of natural sexuality.

It is a widely repeated adage that “sex sells,” and there is a very good reason for this. As Laura Mulvey describes in her essay about sexual dynamics in filmography, “[L]ooking […] is a source of pleasure” (5). As she says, there is a natural psychological urge to look at others, especially in an erotic way, making sexual images very appealing. Looking at sexual ads creates desire, which the content of the advertisement promises to fulfill in the form of social or sexual prestige. “Buy this product”, they imply “and you will be sexy and popular. You will look like/ be able to have sex with someone like this sexy model.” The fact that, as Stuart Ewen shares in his essay, “Chosen People”, in today’s society “identity [is] wedded to the consumption of goods, and…enforced by a thin veil of appearances” (191) creates an “epic crisis of identity” (185), where personal, and therefore, sexual insecurity is rampant. Companies, by presenting images that promise to relieve this insecurity, can be very successful in selling their products. The makers of Lynx have presented the ad mentioned above to appeal to the consumers in today’s market who, as Ewen points out, use products as “marks of their personhood” (187). The promises of satisfaction of these ads are empty, however. In her essay describing Arab sexuality, Nawal el-Saadawi makes many observations that apply to all of modern Western culture. As she writes, the sexuality that these ads promote and attempt to sell offers no real guarantees of pleasure or gratification, and are, instead, a “way of making people pay the prices of ever expanding consumption” (517). The sexual pleasure that these ads promise will not make a consumer happy, el-Saadawi explains, but will just waste more money.

Advertising companies desperately want consumers to waste their money on their merchandise, and they tap into closely held stereotypes and traditional ideas of normalcy in order to ease acceptance of their products. One method of this sneaky advertising is exploiting gender stereotypes. In many advertisements, like the Lynx ad, “sexy” women are skinny, curvy, and scantily clad. In fact, according to a study done by Kyra Lanis and Katherine Covell, “female models [are] more likely to be portrayed as sexually clad, partially clad, or nude” (2). These women are often portrayed as passive and submissive, lying back in their underwear, or, like in the Lynx ad, bending over for viewer enjoyment: becoming simply one more prop in an advertisement. As Lanis and Covell point out, there has been an “increase […] in the portrayal of women in purely’decorative’ roles” in the past few decades in advertisements, leading to, “increased public self-consciousness and social anxiety in women”(1). As Mulvey points out, the images of women as passive objects, “turn the represented figure [...] into a fetish” (15). Real women cannot possibly match up to the fetishized versions of them represented in advertisements, and therefore begin to doubt themselves- creating the type of insecurity that Ewen believes leads people to further buy into consumerism.

The stereotypical male as portrayed in ads, on the other hand, is completely different. He is strong and powerful: he commands attention and respect. Unlike the woman, who often becomes just an object that displays product, the man often takes an active role in ads. Men in advertisements are, at the same time, the active participant of sexuality and victims of the seductions of the female. In the Lynx ad, for example, the man (who is being addressed as “you”- the consumer) has both roles—he is the active watcher and invader of the woman’s space, as well as the victim of her sexiness (she is, after all, “making” him lose control). As el-Saadawi writes, “man in the face of such seduction [is] portrayed as helpless, drained of all of his capacities to be positive or to resist” (520). He becomes powerless to deny his desire. Advertisers appeal to this confusing logical dichotomy in order to take away the sexual guilt that some consumers may have. They know, as Mulvey writes in her essay, that they need to appeal to the “controlling male gaze” (17). In western culture, the man is, traditionally, in control of society, and therefore of consumer capitalism. It makes sense in this traditional framework that companies aim their ads at (typically heterosexual) males. Everything from women’s clothing to men’s cologne is directed at the male gaze, which, “projects its fantasy onto the female figure” (Mulvey 10). Therefore, even in ads “directed” at women, female models are still often portrayed as passive sexual objects. While women in ads are portrayed as objects, and therefore supposed to relate to the product being sold, men are treated as the buyers. In the world of advertising, men are the real consumers. Advertising companies spend billions of dollars to uphold this traditional patriarchal worldview, in spite of the impressive strides that have been made to improve the roles of women.

Instead of portraying women as strong or equal to men, advertisers often choose to take the easy way out by upholding traditional stereotypes of women. Breaking stereotypes and putting forward progressive imagery can often be risky, as not everyone will accept these new images. The strong negative reaction by very vocal social conservatives to a recent J. Crew ad, which shows a mother painting her real-life son’s nails, has shown that consumers are not always welcoming of new portrayals of gender roles, and many companies would rather not risk a backlash. Because of this, it is often easier to stick to the same gender roles that have existed for centuries. Advertisers love to manipulate these stereotypes, because they are familiar to everyone. One gender perception that el-Saadawi writes about is that, traditionally, “most men […] fear woman and yet desire her” (534). Women, through this stereotypical lens, are shown as sexy and seductive- aggressive in their passivity. They have the ability to “make [the viewer] lose control” with just the slightest glance. This portrayal of women, both as desirable and dangerous, can have extremely negative implications.

Ads can influence the ways in which we view others, and negative stereotypes of women create negative perceptions of women. In Covell and Lanis’s study, “Images of Women in Advertisements,” they looked at the way in which female models appear in ads and how this can affect the way in which viewers perceive women in general. As their study shows, “the power of advertisements to manipulate attitudes of […] importance […] should not be underestimated” (7). As these scientists were alarmed to discover, sexually charged ads have powerful effects on the men who view them. Covell and Lanis found that the men who viewed ads that portray women as sexual objects,as the Lynx ad mentioned, had much more negative perspectives of women. They were more likely to see violence against women as acceptable and were more accepting of the “rape myth” — the idea that a woman would prevent rape if she really wanted to— implying that if rape occurs, the woman was asking for it (5-6). Covell and Lanis conclude that the portrayal of women in ads as subordinate sexual objects make them seem deserving of sexual violence (7), meaning that, ultimately, “sexually degrading media depictions of women promote rape-supportive attitudes and beliefs” (3). The finding by Covell and Lanis that the advertising of consumer products can have such a powerful effect on interpersonal interactions is profoundly disturbing- especially when placed in the context of the consumerist society that Ewen describes, in which citizens base their entire identities upon what products that they buy. Ads that sexually degrade women, therefore, are not only hawking a product, but are also selling a worldview and identity that assess women in a negative and ominous way.

In today’s consumerist world, where “loneliness and emptiness are common in…everyday life” , how can we resist the influence of ads that promise us relationships and popularity (Ewen 196)? Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect advertisers to stop using sexual images completely, as sex is a natural part of life, and it is linked in fundamental ways with our psyches. But exploiting sexuality in a way that strips women of their sexual agency and turns them into just another product, is unacceptable and, as Covell and Lanis show, ultimately dangerous and socially irresponsible. Since advertisers care more about selling a product than creating responsible, healthy cultural views, consumers must take the responsibility to show them which ads are unacceptable by changing their buying habits and voicing their opinions. Women need to let companies know that sexually degrading ads will cause them to lose business. As the Dove Company has shown with its ads showing all different shapes, sizes, and ages of women playing an active part in choosing the products they use, it is possible to portray women’s bodies in a positive and healthy way. Not only has the Dove “Real Beauty” campaign earned the company awards and many supporters, it has resulted in a 33% increase in market shares (Dove’s Big Ideal). Advertisers and consumers, as well as Dove’s sister company Lynx, need to learn from this company’s success at breaking gender stereotypes and begin showing women as strong, active participants in the consumer market. All of us, consumers and advertisers, must, once and for all “dar[e] to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire” (Mulvey 5) —one based, not on unbalanced power dynamics and degradation, but rather on mutual respect and admiration for fellow human beings.

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