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Roles of Women in Advertising: The Objectification of Women and the Shift to an Empowering Ad Frame

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Abstract

Roles of Women in Advertising: The Objectification of Women and the Shift to an Empowering Ad Frame

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This report examines the sexualization and objectification of women in print advertising, and the consequences of these depictions. The major themes found in advertising are discussed, and their role in reinforcing sexism and female stereotypes. Advertising's impact on society's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior in relation to social comparison theory and cultivation theory are examined. The report examines historical implications of women's role in advertising and the gradual shift to new trends in advertising that seek to empower women. Through content analysis of the 2005 Nike Real Women campaign, implications and recommendations for future advertising are discussed.

Table of Contents

Roles of Women in Advertising: The Objectification of Women and the Shift to an Empowering Ad Frame 1

Introduction 1

Pervasiveness of Advertising 2

Social Comparison Theory & Cultivation Theory 4

Sexualization of Women in Advertising 6

Reinforcing Sexism: Common Themes in Advertising 7

The Portrayal of Women as Sex Objects 12

The Portrayal of Women as Victims 13

Violence Against Women: A Growing Problem 14

The Trivialization of Violence Against Women 14

Historical Context: Women's Role in Advertising 18

Shifts in Portrayal of Women in Advertisements 24

Women's Liberation Movement: A New Attitude Among Women 26

Nike Real Women Campaign: Empowering Women 27

Critique & Analysis 28

Recommendations 31

Conclusion: Future Implications 33

References 35

Roles of Women in Advertising: The Objectification of Women and the Shift to an Empowering Ad Frame

Introduction

Within any magazine, it seems as though advertisements dominate the magazine. According to a recent data from the Publishers Information Bureau, advertisements maintain between 46 percent and 51 percent of all magazine content over the past ten years (Ad Age, 2009). In any given ad, one is most likely to see an image of the "idealized woman." She's most likely tall, thin, well-dressed, has beautiful skin with perfect features and hair (Kilbourne 1999). Not only does the "idealized woman" present an unrealistic portrayal of beauty, she is often presented in a highly sexualized and eroticized manner. As advertisers continue to flood consumers' minds with images of objectified women, many women are left feeling inadequate, resulting in an attempt to mold herself into the "ideal woman." Despite research that reveals that such images activate the use of gender stereotypes in social perception and behavior and create damaging mental, psychological and societal problems, the "sex sells" mentality within advertising remains pervasive.

This report examines the sexualization and objectification of women in print advertising, and the consequences of these depictions. I will discuss the major themes found in advertising, and their role in reinforcing sexism and female stereotypes. I will then examine advertising's impact on society's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior in relation to social comparison theory and cultivation theory. I will explore the historical implications of women's role in advertising and the gradual shift to new trends in

advertising that seek to empower women. Finally, through content analysis of the Nike Real Women campaign, I will provide implications and recommendations for future advertising.

Pervasiveness of Advertising

Advertising is something that cannot be escaped. People are exposed to advertisements every time they open a magazine or newspaper, or drive down a highway in which billboards are present. According to Jean Kilbourne, recognized author and filmmaker known for her work on the image of women in advertising, advertising is our *environment*. "We cannot escape it, advertising's message are inside our intimate relationships, our homes, our hearts, our heads" (Kilbourne 2005). Advertising is a pervasive form of media to which people do not often give conscious attention, and, therefore, its social messages are likely to remain unquestioned (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). As consumers, we are bombarded with advertisements so frequently from various forms of media, that we mindlessly accept advertising messages without thinking to question what the they are telling us or how they make us feel. Although the primary objective of advertisements is to create awareness and increase sales, social scientists have often suggested that they may have more wide-ranging effects on our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors (Lavine, Sweeney, Wagner 1999).

With the power of persuasion, advertisements provide a gauge for what is desirable and what is normal. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, advertising serves to define, or frame, reality. Because of this, the social impact of advertising cannot be overstated (Goffman 1947, 1949). The "desired" and "normal" expectation that

advertisements urge women to achieve is not only narrow and superficial, but also impossible because it is *artificial* (Kilbourne 1999). The models seen in advertisements maintain a body type that is only achieved by 5 percent of females. Although female attractiveness was once epitomized by a plump, rounder physique, today's ideal emphasizes a slender body type. With this image continually reinforced through all forms of advertisements, women tend to be judged and judge themselves for not achieving the look portrayed by models. Coincident with this increasing norm of thinness, research on body images indicates that women consistently perceive themselves as overweight and have a desire to be thinner (Lavine, Sweeney, Wagner 1999). The cultural pressures that glorify "thinness" and obtaining the "perfect body" contribute to society valuing people on the basis of physical appearance and not inner qualities and strength (National Eating Disorder Association 2013). According to Kilbourne (1999), advertising is one of the most potent messengers in a culture that can be toxic for girls' self esteem.

With this increasing norm to be thin, the number of women dissatisfied with their body image has also increased. More startling is media's effect on young girls. According to Kilbourne, advertising is one of the most potent messengers in a culture that can be toxic for girls' self-esteem. In 2007, a study was undertaken as part of the stealth launch of a new Dove advertisement campaign, which sought to highlight the pressures that the beauty industry places on young girls. The study revealed that by the time the average girl is 12 years old, she will have been exposed to more than 77,000 advertisements (Shields 2007). The international study, which surveyed 2,000 girls in the U.K. and U.S. aged between 10 and 14, confirmed the link between images of female perfection that

dominate the media and increasing cases of low self esteem among young women. Results showed that 77 percent of the young girls reported feeling fat, ugly, and depressed when being shown pictures of models and celebrities (Shields 2007).

The effects of low self-esteem and poor body image were revealed in the high amount of physical and mental health problems among the young women in the study, in addition to contributing to the rise of eating disorders. Dr. Susie Orbach, a psychotherapist and author of *Time to Talk*, a book designed to help mothers engage with young daughters on body image and self-esteem, explained possible side effects of advertising on vulnerable individuals (Shields 2007). "Young girls are bombarded by millions of images of digitally manipulated, airbrushed beauty every day, and research tells us this onslaught can often be responsible for feelings of low self-esteem." Girls of all ages are sent a message that she must be flawlessly beautiful, and, above all else these days, they must be thin (Kilbourne 1999). Exposure to these images would not be as impactful to young minds if we did not live in a culture that encourages us to believe that we can and should remake our bodies into perfect commodities (Kilbourne 1999). According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), about 35 to 37 percent of adolescent girls engage in crash dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting or take diet pills or laxatives. More alarming is that studies reveal 42 percent of first, second and third-graders report wanting to be thinner (Easton 2013).

Social Comparison Theory & Cultivation Theory

According to Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, individuals have a tendency to rate and evaluate themselves through comparisons with others. Social

comparison theory differentiates between two types of comparisons, downward and upward. When one compares downward, or compares themselves to those perceived as worse off, self-esteem is heightened. Contrarily, when one compares upward, or to those deemed superior, then self-esteem decreases. Social comparison theory also states that we seek out individuals with highly valued assets with whom to upwardly compare ourselves. This theory helps explain the drive for thinness that women maintain (Van Vonderen, Kinnally 2012). It also helps explain a possible correlation between exposure to advertising images of idealized bodies and its subsequent effect on body image and eating disorder symptoms. Our society has defined what is beautiful through images that are presented by the media, specifically through advertisements. Therefore, it is not surprising that women have chosen the models and celebrities depicted in magazines and throughout media as the standard for which to reach.

Repeated exposure to magazine advertisements can contribute to increased level of body dissatisfaction among young women (Kilbourne 1999). According to Cultivation Theory, developed by George Gerbner, there is a connection between the amount of media exposure and one's attitude and beliefs. Gerbner's focus was on the idea that television plays a central role in viewers' perceptions of the world by affecting attitudes, beliefs, and ways of thinking. The research strategy used, called Cultivation Analysis, focused specifically on television's contributions to viewers' conceptions to reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, Shanahan, 2002). Through extensive studies, Gerbner discovered that heavy television viewers, those that watched more than four hours of television per day, hold opinions and ideals that are typically portrayed on

television than in the real world. Although Cultivation Theory focused on television, the concept can be applied to exposure to other forms of media. Within print advertising, studies have proven a connection between exposure to print advertisements and body dissatisfaction among women. A researcher at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston found that the more frequently girls read magazines, the more likely they were to diet and feel that magazines influence their ideal body shape (Kilbourne 1999). Studies at Stanford University and the University of Massachusetts found that approximately 70 percent of college women say they feel worse about their appearance after reading women's magazines (Kilbourne 1999). Cultivation Theory holds that heavy viewers of television will experience the effects of mainstreaming, in which the attitudes and opinions of the viewer are essentially created by information and portrayals they receive from television. In advertising in which women's beauty is narrowly defined by extremely thin models, it can be assumed that women exposed to continual advertising presenting this ideal will shape their attitudes on what is normal and expected of themselves (Hargreaves, Tiggerman 2003).

Sexualization of Women in Advertising

In addition to advertisements' portrayal of ideal beauty, women are presented as highly sexualized and objectified in many images in print media. Ads featuring nearly nude women, sexually posed and shown being dominated by men are common images found in advertisements. However, there is concern that graphic sexual images, especially in advertisements, appear to be more extreme, pervasive, and perverse than ever before. Images that were once reserved for the pornographic industry are now commonplace in

family magazines, newspapers, TV commercials, billboards, and online (Kilbourne 2005). Some argue that this is progressive, and therefore positive because it leads to a more open society that is more comfortable with their sexuality (Kilbourne 1999). Kilbourne argues, however, that these types of images are not only demeaning and harmful to all of us (especially children and teenagers), they also "have a cumulative effect that is profoundly anti-erotic" (Kilbourne 1999). These images define what and who is sexy. Women are only considered sexy only if they are young, thin, carefully groomed, sprayed and scented. As a result, men are conditioned to seek partners meeting this criteria, and to feel disappointed if they fail to find such a woman (Kilbourne 2005). In addition, Kilbourne argues that because our children are bombarded with these sexual images in advertising, they are pressured to look 'sexy' at absurdly young ages. What used to be reserved for adults is now public and ordinary, infiltrating young minds daily.

The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) reported that the sexualization of women and girls is related to numerous societal problems, and that sexual imagery can have adverse effects on the physical and emotional well being of young girls. Much of the attention of sociologists on this subject focuses on the ways in which women are shown in subordinate, subservient, and male pleasing roles, and on how media representation reflects and reinforces sexism in society.

Reinforcing Sexism: Common Themes in Advertising

In Goffman's (1979) discussion of men and women's portrayal in advertisements, he notes that advertisements do not depict how men and women actually behave. Instead, they serve the social purpose of convincing us that this is how women and men are, want

to be, or should be. Goffman outlines common themes in the representation of women found in advertising and how media reinforces sexism in society.

The first common theme addressed is what Goffman calls *The Artificial Look*. Models in advertising present women with an ideal definition of beauty that is impossible to achieve. Firstly, the images themselves are created artificially by the means of studio lighting, airbrushing, and computer enhancement. Secondly, models themselves maintain a body type that only 5 percent of females maintain. The average American woman is 5 feet 4 inches weighing 140lbs., while the average model is 5'11 and 110 lbs. (The National Eating Disorder Association). Despite the underrepresentation of real women, this tends to be the only female body type seen in mass media, resulting in the struggle of women to transform into this depiction of ideal beauty.

The second common theme Goffman addresses is *Dismemberment*. Mass media frequently presents women in a dehumanized way, sacrificing their humanity in order to display the artificial ideal. Women are not only turned into a "thing," but the *thing* is then broken down into component parts. She is dismembered. The result is we have numerous images of lips, legs, breasts, butts and torsos. Consider an advertisement for Skintimate shaving cream, presenting only an image of the model's legs or an advertisement for Seven jeans in which only the woman's behind is seen. In addition, women are often illustrated with only their body showing and their head missing in an advertisement. This emphasizes that females are not valued for their intellect, but for their external form (Goffman 1979). Presenting women as fragmented and disconnected detracts from thinking of women as real people, with their own intellect, feelings, dreams and desires

(Jhally 1995). As a result, women are now presented as nothing more than objects of consumption, further emphasizing a female stereotype.

Goffman also addresses the presentation of women as nothing more than a product for male pleasure and consumption. *Commodification*, as Goffman defines it, is achieved when a visual association if made between some product and the female form. For example, this a common theme found in beer and liquor advertisements. Most alcohol advertisements depict a highly sexualized woman holding, serving, or drinking a certain beverage, in which men are lusting after. Both are promoted as a pleasure object. It sends the message that their role is simply to cater to others' needs and desires, and males are persuaded to view women as nothing more than providers of pleasure. When females are presented as a commodity, their subjectivity and humanity is denied (Goffman 1979).

In presenting women as desirable commodities and objects for pleasure, women's hands are therefore less likely to be depicted as engaging in utilitarian or practical activities. Instead, women's hands are more likely to be shown tracing the outline of something, caressing and cuddling. Goffman calls this *The Feminine Touch* or ritualistic touching, which describes the notion that whatever product being touched is precious and desirable. In addition, if the advertisement depicts a woman touching herself in any way, the body becomes the desirable product, further emphasizing the objectification of women.

Goffman argues that the positioning of bodies displays appropriate social roles for the genders. A person's behavior and appearance can be expressive and symbolic,

communicating one's social identity (Goffman 1979). Social identity depicts a person's inner state and feelings about their intentions and expectations, and their relationship with others. According to Goffman, every culture has developed culture symbolic codes that help create social identities and relationships. In advertising, he points out that the way in which men and women are depicted together in advertisements draws on these codes.

For example in images in which men and women are portrayed together, men are always shown as taller. In contrast, according to these indicative codes, if a woman is the taller than the man, the female is the more powerful figure. According to conventional codes, our cultural ideal is to portray the man as the dominating, more powerful person. Therefore, the most common image presented in advertisements is that of the male being taller and the female being shorter.

The sixth common theme is *Function Ranking*, in which images portraying an activity can also be symbolic and expressive. Goffman points out that when a person is acting out a function in an image, the function is ranked. The male is usually acting out the senior function, while the female is acting out junior function (Goffman 1979). Men are shown doing the action, while the woman is shown helping the man do the action. Males are more likely to be shown in an executive leadership role, while women are more frequently shown in a supportive role, or decorative accessory type role.

Ritualization of Subordination, another common theme in advertising, which displays the subordination of females to males. Goffman explains that images often depict women as "lower" than men. This is often done by presenting women on the floor or lying recumbent on a bed. By positioning the female lower, Goffman suggests that this

can indicate social identity and social relationship between men and women. The woman is the inferior figure, while the man is placed higher, suggesting power and esteem. Goffman notes that the interaction rituals between a man and a woman typically signal women's socially subordinate status to men. Another common image illustrating subordination is in the male/female kiss. When an embrace or kiss is shown, women are commonly shown leaning back, submitting to the advance of the man. These images depict women as passively welcoming the attention, while the man is shown initiating the encounter. This could explain males' expectation of females to submit to their sexual needs, and then interpret refusal for desire. Magazines images often convey this idea that sex is about male aggression and female submission. Consequently, violence is subtly encouraged by ads that encourage men to be forceful or dominate (Kilbourne 1999).

Another theme that emphasizes female subordination is found in images that portray women as children. Women are frequently portrayed in a childlike role, sitting on a man's lap or being protected or shielded by a man. Women are also seen coyly putting their fingers in their mouth, standing pigeon-toed, sucking lollipops or wearing little girl clothes. Kilbourne suggests that this depiction of women is another way in which women are kept in a stereotypical role. The message sent to women is to remain young, stay passive, powerless and dependent (Kilbourne 1999).

Likewise, we often see women disempowered in images in which they are disengaged or withdrawn from active participation in social scenes. Often the woman is seen turning her ace away, looking dreamy and introverted. Goffman calls this *Licensed Withdrawa*l. Rather than being portrayed as active, powerful, and in-charge females,

they are shown as removed into internal involvement, overcome with emotions. Individuals who are in control of their lives stand upright and alert. Contrarily, females appear off-balance, insecure and weak (Kilbourne 1999). In addition, women are often showed symbolically silenced by placing their hands over their mouth. Similarly, women are also shown withdrawn in a dreamy, introverted state. As they pose, they become nothing more than objects for men to gaze at and desire. This is commonly seen in cosmetic and perfume advertisements. Men, in contrast, are often depicted in ads as powerful, active, engaged and in charge of their activity. They are rarely portrayed as objects to be gazed at like women, especially in images in which both men and women are present.

The Portrayal of Women as Sex Objects

A 2008 content analysis examined the depiction of nearly 2,000 advertisements from 58 popular U.S. magazines (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008) found that women were portrayed as sex objects in one half of the advertisements examined, on average. These types of advertisements appeared most frequently in men's, women's fashion, and adolescent magazines. In one advertisement for Christian Dior's "Addict" perfume, a woman wears nothing but her bra and underwear, and appears to be having withdrawal symptoms, as she thrashes her body and drips beads of sweat. Her bra is hanging off of one of her shoulders, almost exposing her breast. The image depicts a woman who is powerless and out of control, clearly exhibiting a sex object (*Elle* magazine 2002). This advertisement reiterates Goffman's argument that body positioning in these images are symbolic and expressive of one's social identity. The Dior perfume advertisement could

also represent Goffman's idea that women are often presented as strictly a product of male pleasure. By portraying the women as helpless and powerless, in a sexual manner, the woman becomes nothing more than an object.

The Portrayal of Women as Victims

Stankiewicz and Rosselli (2008) revealed the extent to which women were portrayed as victims. Data revealed that 9 percent of advertisements that featured women in men's magazines portrayed them both as sex objects and targets of violence, manipulation, or sexual aggression, as lifeless, or in bondage. The study also sought to determine if women were ever portrayed as perpetrators, as opposed to victims, in advertisements. Consistent with expectations, women were three times more likely to be portrayed as victims rather than the aggressors. The pervasiveness of media images that portray women (and not men) as highly sexualized is believed to maintain men's dominance by designating women's bodies as property that can be evaluated, ogled, and touched at the whim's of men's desire (Kilbourne 1999).

Repeated to exposure to these types of images could contribute to a broad range of social problems, including sexist attitudes, sexual harassment, violence against women and stereotypical perceptions of men and women (Lavine 1999). This trend to simultaneously sexualize and victimize women across various forms of media is shown to increase the acceptance of violence against women (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008), reemphasizing Goffman's belief that advertising serves to define what is normal and accepted.

Violence Against Women: A Growing Problem

In 2000, the World Health Organization conducted large-scale studies worldwide that revealed between 10 and 50 percent of women have attested to having been physically assaulted by an intimate partner (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). While ads do not directly cause violence, the violent images contribute to a state of terror (Kilbourne 1999). According to Kilbourne, turning a human being into an object, a thing, is almost always the first step toward justifying violence against a person. "It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to be violent toward someone we see as equal, someone we have empathy with," Kilbourne explained. "But it is very easy to abuse a thing." This idea can be demonstrated in racism and homophobia. When the person becomes an object, violence is inevitable. The violence and abuse against women is the chilling result of objectification (Kilbourne 1999).

The Trivialization of Violence Against Women

The tendency to trivialize sexual violence in our culture has been addressed within legal system. The United States Judiciary Committee issued a report in 1993 stating that the justice system had not been fulfilling its obligation toward defending rape victims and prosecuting rapists (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). In the same report, Senator Joseph Biden Jr. wrote, "The disparity in how our system prosecutes rape, in contrast to other violent crimes, mirrors the disparity in our society's attitudes toward these acts." In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) that ensured perpetrators of violence against women would be held accountable for their crimes (National Organization for Women 2004). Yet despite government awareness in the

United States, the trivialization of sexual violence against women is still a major concern twenty years later.

A 2010 the Department of Justice revealed that one in five women have been raped or had experienced attempted rape in their lifetime, and one in four reported being beaten by an intimate partner (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2011). They estimated that 188,380 Americans were victims of sexual violence in 2010, and around 84,767 assaults defined as forcible rapes were reported in 2010 (Rabin 2010).

Similarly, research conducted with men reveals that rape and sexual coercion against women are widespread issues. Malamuth (1981) reviewed numerous studies in which men (mostly college students) were asked to rate the likelihood of raping a woman if they were assured they would not be caught or punished (Stankiewicz 2008). The results revealed that under various conditions an average of approximately 35 percent of the men reported some likelihood of raping a woman. A more recent study similar to Malmuth's in 1996, which surveyed 159 college men found that 34 percent of respondents reported some likelihood to rape (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008).

Women's fears are not entirely ungrounded. There is a tendency to excuse male perpetrators of sexual violence, thereby trivializing the crime and shifting the responsibility to the victim (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). In a landmark study conducted by M.R. Burt (1980), interviews of 598 randomly sampled men and women revealed that rape myths are widely held by Americans. Burt defined rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists—create a climate hostile

to rape victims." The study revealed more than 50 percent of participants agreed that in the majority of rape cases, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation.

Among rape or sexual assault cases that went underreported between 2005 and 2010, the most common reason victims gave for not reporting was fear of reprisal (U.S. Department of Justice, March 2013). According to a U.S. Department of Justice report *Female Victims of Sexual Violence 1994-2010*, the percentage of reported rape victimizations against females that resulted in an arrest decreased from 47 percent in 1994-98 to 31 percent in 2005-10. Out of 283,000 rape victimization cases between 2005 and 2010, only 12 percent resulted in arrest.

As Kilbourne (1999) discussed, advertisements aren't responsible for violence against women, but violent images in which women are objectified create a climate of widespread violence. An editorial in Advertising Age suggests that even some advertisers are concerned about this. "Clearly it is time to wipe out sexism in beer ads; for the brewers and their agencies to wake up and join the rest of American in realizing sexism, sexual harassment, and the cultural portrayal of women in advertising are inextricably linked" (Kilbourne 1999). When power is unequal, when one group is oppressed or discriminated against as a *group*, where there is a context of systematic and historical oppression, stereotypes and prejudice have different weight and meaning (Kilbourne 1999). Kilbourne goes on to explain, "When men objectify women, they do so in a cultural context in which women are constantly objectified and in which there are consequences—from economic discrimination to violence—to that objectification."

Many factors have been suggested to explain aggression toward women and the trivialization of sexual violence against women in American culture. One explanation that has been contributed to this issue is women's portrayal as sex objects and victims within media imagery (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). Studies have shown that the sexual victimization of women in pornography, non-pornographic films and music videos increases attitudes supportive of sexual violence (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). Although the effects of sexual violence in advertising have yet to be studied, there is evidence that exposure to sexually objectifying images produce anti-women attitudes (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). According to Kilbourne (1999), the body positions, facial expressions and sexual power relationships between men and women in print advertising images have often been adopted from violent pornography. Such imagery, she suggests, creates an environment in which certain attitudes and values flourish, including the attitude that women are valuable only as objects of men's desire. In addition, these images promote attitudes that violence is erotic and that real men are always sexually aggressive (Kilbourne 1999). By depicting women as sex objects who are also victims of aggression promotes the belief that submission is a desirable trait in women (Kilbourne 1999).

Additionally, whenever women are simultaneously presented as sexualized and distressed, an association between women's sexuality and the experience of physical and emotional pain is reinforced. (Stankiewicz, Rosselli 2008). Because of this, it is reasonable to suggest that continual exposure to such images has contributed to the hostility and violence toward women within American culture. Kilbourne supports this claim by drawing specific examples within advertising in which women are presented as

physically and emotionally vulnerable. The male is unambiguously presented as the dominant figure, while the female is shown in subordination. Kilbourne suggests the commonality of these types of images found in advertising explain why men's dominance and women's subordination is eroticized in popular culture.

Historical Context: Women's Role in Advertising

To understand how our culture arrived at this place in which highly sexualized advertisements are so common and accepted, it is important to observe the evolution of women's roles throughout history. It was during the 1960s that deep cultural changes were altering the role of women in society (Walsh 2010). More females were entering the workforce than ever before. No longer were women confined to the idealized image of the happy, American housewife whose only role was to cook, clean and take care of the children. The civil rights and antiwar movements politicized and radicalized a growing number of women who struggled with contradicting expectations about work and family. This feminist movement slowly began to take hold, and a shift in gender roles subsequently occurred in the following decades (Walsh 2010).

The 1980s brought a decade of soaring stock markets and tax reductions, and the making and spending of money became an integral part of the mainstream culture (Sivulka 2009). It was no surprise that even those who were not so wealthy aspired to have this lifestyle, and found themselves in the quest to "have it all." In the new consumer economy, media was fragmenting the nation's mass market into an endless array of subcultures (Sivulka 2009). With the introduction of cable television, subcultures developed around different lifestyles. The expanding consumer capitalism and the

"pursuit of personal fulfillment" sparked in the 1960s were inseparable. As a result, "advertisers began to tie their products to immediate gratification, distinct lifestyles, youth and sexuality" (Sivulka 2009).

The revival of the feminist movement not only gave women more opportunities, it also resulted in an enormous shift in the professional and educational endeavors of women (Sivulka 2009). Two-family incomes became much more common, and also allowed for more opportunities for women due to an expanding consumer economy. Spurred by affirmative action, employment opportunities for women dramatically increased, while the number of homemakers declined (Sivulka 2009). In 1982, women accounted for 43.5 percent in the labor force, and women within many professions saw significant success and modest gains. However, working women continued to struggle balancing career and family.

This era created an extremely difficult task for marketers to decipher what women really wanted—from financial services to household items—and how to sell it to them. It wasn't until 1982, when the works of Rena Bartos became the most influential in solving these problems and changing marketing to women. Bartos, who was the senior vice president at J. Walter Thompson, published the book *The Moving Target*, in which she analyzed the changing patterns of consumption and feelings toward consumption among women, as well as ways to reach it (Miley, Mack 2009). Bartos explained that marketers generally stereotyped women as housewives, when in reality, not all women were married. In her book, she explained "women have moved from defining themselves in terms of derived status. They are moving toward wanting a sense of personal identity

beyond those in domestic roles." Her goal in writing the book was to convince advertisers that women's role in the market is diverse and ever changing, and marketers should be more realistic in how they approach them. She suggested that it was critical that marketers align their strategies and communication with a deep understanding of the attitudes and perception of the consumer themselves when marketing to women (Miley, Mack 2009).

Another important finding in the book revealed that women responded favorably to images that depicted men in domestic roles. Despite this, advertisers continued to assume that the woman's world revolved around the man. This misconception was due in large part to the fact that men still dominated the advertising and marketing industry. Men still maintained most senior management positions on both the client side and the agency side (Sivulka 2009). Because of this, women were still inaccurately portrayed in advertising. However, that situation was slowly changing. A new generation of female college graduates of the late 1960s and early 1970s were entering advertising, despite continued discrimination toward women.

Marketers began to recognize that targeting the "traditional stay-at-home mom" was excluding a large part of the women's market. While women continued to become more independent, the values of independence and self-fulfillment began to assert themselves in sexually charged ads for everything from perfumes to blue jeans (Sivulka 2009). Up until this time, sex in advertising was minimal and discreet. In the 1950's, an advertisement might contain a beautiful woman in a tight sweater, and might be mildly sensuous. However, the 1980s brought an even greater use of sexuality in advertising that

had never been seen until that time. It can be traced to the sexual revolution brought about in the 1960s with the introduction of two magazines *Cosmo* and *Playgirl* magazine, which paved the way for more sexualized ads in the 1980's and 1990's (Sivulka 2009).

According to *Ad Women*, this sexual adventurism is best represented with the work of Rochelle Udell, who captured the attention of women consumers with her creation of some of the most sensual and provocative advertisements for Calvin Klein and Chanel fragrances. In 1981, she began to create a series of Calvin Klein ads that shocked the moral majority of America. Many found the sexual openness to be refreshing and healthy, as long as women weren't portrayed in a demeaning way. (Sivulka 2009). Explicit and pervasive sexuality in advertising continued, especially in advertisements aimed at women. In addition to ads showing more skin, another set of ads presented a common theme of sexual fantasies with women in control (Sivulka 2009). The sexual revolution brought along breakthrough thinking and sexual candor of a new generation of feminists. Marketing research at the time suggested that the gains women had made in the workplace had actually made them more receptive to ads that represented their desires and their desirability (Sivulka 2009). Even though ads became more risqué and portrayed them as sex objects, women enthusiastically accepted any advertisement that portrayed men under their domination. "Women like it when they're portrayed as taking charge in a situation. It implies power," noted Rena Bartos.

By the 1990s, global competition had placed American corporations under pressure to restructure and simplify, which forced many to pare down their organizations to the essential core. Economic realities in addition to demographic and lifestyle changes

resulted in large shifts in consumer behavior (Sivulka 2009). Even though the economy stabilized by 1995, Americans were finally aware that "seeming abundance was in fact finite," and the classic American dream was fading (Sivulka 2009). Costs for healthcare, housing and college soared. In order to maintain or improve earlier income levels, the rate of two-income households also increased (Sivulka 2009). At the same time, America became more racially and ethnically diverse. The confusion and complications of the American culture made it even more difficult for advertisers to speak to women in any single voice.

Third-wave feminism emerged out of this generation, and feminists clashed over issues relating to sexuality, women's bodies, and cultural representation (Sivulka 2009). What emerged was advertisers removing all sexual restraint, as pornography moved from theaters and into internet, videos and later DVDs. Women's fashion also took a trend toward more provocative and revealing clothing, while marketers began targeting preteens and teens.

Although a power shift had already began between men and women in the 1980's, women finally began to break into the top layer of management in the 1990s (Sivulka 2009). Women were attaining credentials like never before during this decade. As women attained higher degree levels and gained more market experience, a greater amount of women entered editorial, publishing, marketing, advertising, publicity, and merchandising fields. As a result, many women were finally able to move into executive suites to hold senior positions, and soon were in charge of the creation and management

of the world's largest ad campaigns. In addition, there were more women on the client side as well (Sivulka 2009).

As women made strides in the advertising industry, they also advanced in politics as well. The year 1992 became known as Year of the Woman, after four female senators were elected in the United States. Before then, four women had never been elected into the U.S. Senate at the same time (Sivulka 2009). In addition, scandal surrounding then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas brought heightened awareness of the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace. A resurgence of feminism led to an increase in women's involvement in political activity (Sivulka 2009). As the topic of sexual harassment gained awareness, many Americans began to make a connection between sexist advertising and more serious offenses in the workplace (Sivulka 2009). Feminists took a new attitude toward sexuality. Women began to stand up against companies that portrayed women in a sexist attitude. A new outlook began to emerge among women. No longer did they approve highly sexualized advertising, whether it portrayed them in a position of power or not. Women were suddenly saying, "It matters to us what your company is saying and how you're portraying women—if we don't like it, we'll buy else wear," explained Barbara Feigin, Grey Advertising's head of research at the time. Other external forces were also at work that generated an increase in women's involvement (Sivulka 2009). Women were being hired into the executive positions in agencies across the country. Not only were they hired as executive creative directors and vice presidents, but they were also being hired as agency presidents. In 1992, Charlotte Beers became the chief executive of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, making her the most powerful woman in

the advertising industry (Sivulka 2009). No woman had ever had the head position of an ad agency before then.

With women in new positions of power in all areas of the workforce and the start of women's greater political activity in the campaigns for Congress, advertising sought to create bold, new campaigns that celebrated feminism. Fashion, beauty and cosmetics and even the automotive industry began to change their advertising to reflect the enormous strides made by women in the professional world (Sivulka 2009). Even the underwear market, which was a $2.7 billion market at the time, took steps to reduce the images that offended feminine sensibilities. Instead, many brands addressed women as active, confident, and professionally accomplished (Sivulka 2009).

Shifts in the Portrayal of Women in Advertisements

Before this time, advertising for women's undergarments often relied on stereotypes, depicting women as sex objects. Most advertisements would show a semi-naked, stiffly posed model. Jockey Company, however, did not want to promote sex in their advertising campaign. Instead, they decided to use real people as its models. Research at the time had shown that use of idealized models created skepticism among consumers, and that they favored the use of real people much more (Sivulka 2009). Instead of idealized, stick-thin models, female readers found female airline pilots, truck drivers and dentists placed in the ads. According to Susan Smallweil, former director of Warwick Advertising who worked on the Jockey campaign, the use of real people in the ads was an attempt to appeal in a specific way to a specific type of underwear consumer.

Not only did the campaign appeal to female consumers, it also generated publicity resulting in hundreds of women writing to inquire about being models (Sivulka 2009).

Following Jockey Company's lead, Maidenform sought to cast off their outdated sexist image by creating an anti-stereotype campaign that poked fun at the idea that women should conform to society's image of them (Sivulka 2009). To sell their bras and underwear, they aimed to parody certain female stereotypes. In one ad, they showed women bound in corsets and bustles and used taglines that read, "Isn't it nice to live in a time when women aren't being pushed around so much anymore?" Research convinced Maidenform that "women want substance and directness in their advertising, and they want companies to stand for something, to be activists" (Sivulka 2009).

In 1994, Wonderbra sought to empower women with a campaign that showed models wearing only a Wonderbra with slogans such as, "Look me in the eyes and tell me you love me" and "Live it up." Many feminist groups voiced their opposition, saying that the ads send the message that women should focus on their breasts for attention (Sivulka 2009). As a result, magazine advertisers gradually began to convey that they understand women's lifestyle and priorities. Because more women held marketing and advertising positions, they took the lead in development of many campaigns to ensure that women were represented fairly and respectfully (Sivulka 2009). Advertisers attempted to create emotional ties with the consumers, and rejected the traditional fantasy-and-romance approach. They addressed issues in the ads such as maintaining control without being a superwoman, combating fatigue, and balancing work and family.

Women's Liberation Movement: A New Attitude Among Women

From the enormous progress made since the women's liberation movement, a new generation of women has emerged who greatly differ from their older counterparts. Gen Xers (age 30 to 44) and millennials (age 18-29) have witnessed the women before them exhausting themselves in order to achieve an elusive ideal (Miley, Mack 2009). Unlike their predecessors, today's women are no longer bound to perfection. Instead they "aim to be pragmatic, efficient and rooted in reality" (Miley, Mack 2009). In 2009 Advertising Age published an in-depth report titled "The New Female Consumer," which explored the needs of these two younger generations and how marketers can best reach them. The report suggests that women are showing signs that they are not aspiring to perfection in any area of their lives, and are showing a need to be embraced for who they are. As a result, there has been a backlash and anger toward marketers in recent years (Miley, Mack 2009). Because these younger generations of women come from different backgrounds, lifestyles, and demographics, they desire to see advertisements that embrace those differences. Women want products and services that "reflect her unique reality" and "that give her permission to be imperfect" (Miley, Mack 2009).

This new attitude has created a particularly difficult task for marketers to reach women in a lasting, meaningful way. The most important task for marketers is to present female consumers with relevant content that fits into their lives (Miley, Mack 2009). As today's empowered women try to embrace themselves and create more realistic expectations for themselves, many advertisers continue to align content with this new mindset. "For marketers, it is about finding new ways to connect with women," *USA*

Today reported. The article suggested that women seem to be more motivated by women they can relate to than by unattainable images of perfection (Howard 2005).

Nike Real Women Campaign: Empowering Women

In 2005, Nike sought to create a campaign that would resonate with real American women. The campaign made its debut on the heels of Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty," which used real women in all shapes and sizes, rather than thin models. Created by Wieden & Kennedy agency, the series of six different print ads represented six different body parts of the body, with titles that read "big butt" and "thunder thighs." Nike took a similar approach as Dove by using a mix of pro athlete women and real women in their advertisements in order to portray "what is real" as opposed to "ideal" (Howard 2005). "The ads try to illustrate that not all body types are created equally," explained Caren Bell, Nike spokeswoman during the campaign's release. "To be a woman athlete, fit and strong doesn't mean you have to be a sample size."

The Nike campaign hoped to mark a shift in how women are portrayed in the media and advertising (Thomaselli 2005). "It is a change that women – and some men too – have been agitating for 35 years," said noted feminist Gloria Steinem and founder of *Ms.* Magazine. "I spent 15 years of my life pleading for ads that reflected our readers by age, race, and ethnicity." Steinem believed that advertisers could demonstrate that women better responded to more inclusive ads that resonated with real women. However, the approach of the Nike and Dove campaigns were not being utilized, despite a definite trend in society and the marketplace that emphasized self-acceptance and being comfortable in your own skin (Thomaselli 2005).

The campaign generated immediate buzz and disparate reactions. Many praised Nike for its attempt to celebrate all body types. *Advertising Age* reported that 87 percent of poll respondents were adamant that marketers should opt to use images of real women in their campaigns (Thomaselli 2005). Many women agreed that Nike's campaign was refreshing, and that continued exposure to idealized, unattainable depictions of beauty was a continuous reminder that they were inadequate (Thomaselli 2005.) "We've gotten tired of airbrushed pictures none of us can relate to or recognize," said Linda Kaplan Thaler, one of advertising's most prominent women. Kaplan, chief creative officer of her own agency, said that advertisers are loosening the reigns in recognition of the reality that "women are the majority of consumers and are buying most of the products" (Elliot 2005).

While some praised the campaign, others found it offensive and inauthentic. One criticism was that the "real women" used in ads did not depict real American women at all. The women used in the ads ranged in dress sizes from six to 12, while the average American woman is size 14 (Thomaselli 2005). Others criticized that the ads illustrated perfectly sculpted, muscular body parts that were supposed to be "flawed and imperfect," in which real women would find relatable. Yet in reality, many argued that the ads presented bodies just as unattainable as the waif thin models in most advertisements. "The ad is at odds with itself by using terms like 'thunder thighs' next to fit women," said Barbara Lippert, a New York-based ad critic for *Adweek* magazine.

Critique & Analysis

The ads failed to correspond to the average woman in today's society. Many believed that if Nike intended to promote realistic body types, then they failed (Pollack 2005). These criticisms reflect what Goffman called *The Artificial Look*. Not only are the models used in the ads a misrepresentation of real American women, but they encourage us to transform into the women being presented. The struggle women face to achieve ideal beauty has now shifted into the struggle to achieve ideal athleticism and strength. Both are nearly impossible and unrealistic, setting up women to feel even more disappointed when they can't achieve this look.

While Nike sought to celebrate women's strength and individuality, many aspects of the campaign remained offensive and reinforced the objectification of women. Criticism was found in Nike's decision to only include images of a single body part. By doing this, they illustrate what Irving Goffman called *Dismemberment*. By breaking the female body into component parts, she is now presented in a dehumanized way. Further, the face or head is never shown in the campaign, emphasizing that her value is derived from her external form, rather than her intellect. Despite the copy that is included with each advertisement that narrates the woman's thoughts, the true focus of the ad is the specific body part and its emphasis that it does not meet society's "standards." As a result, the words lose their impact and the message that Nike intended to communicate is lost.

The use of Dismemberment within the ads also detracts from Nike's overall purpose of empowering women to embrace their bodies. Not only does the use of

Dismemberment objectify women, but also the close-up shot of each body part makes women put an even stronger emphasis on the importance of that specific body part and the need to enhance it. The Nike campaign promotes the idea of the body being separate entities, rather than a whole. As a result, women view their whole body as many individual pieces. As mentioned earlier, each image shows perfectly toned muscles, which further leads to the promotion of an unattainable physique. If a woman has less than tight, firm legs, she is made to feel that her potential for beauty is ruined. According to Kilbourne, women are conditioned to see their body as a "work in progress," something that is in constant need of alteration or enhancement (Kilbourne (2000). Instead of promoting body satisfaction, the ads encourage women to concentrate on what separate entities they lack. Consequently, women have only exchanged one set of insecurities for another. Instead of fitting into size 0 jeans, the goal becomes to attain perfectly toned arms, legs, buttocks, and back, void of cellulite and flab. Women feel they are unable to wear Nike shorts or spandex without attaining the physique of an athlete, the very product Nike is attempting to sell. The campaign created yet another ideal body that women feel they must strive toward. As Goffman suggested, advertisements provide a gauge for what is desirable and normal.

It can be argued that the Nike ads reflect what Goffman called, *Commodification*, or the presentation of women as nothing more than products of male desire. In one of the advertisements, the woman's back is arched so that her bottom remains the main focus of the ad. The product being advertised, small spandex shorts, are barely noticed. Instead, her body is an object of desire. In another ad, the woman's muscular toned "thunder

thighs" are intended to be the focus of the ad. Upon further scrutiny, however, it is realized that the upward camera angle leads the eye to the woman's pelvic area. Regardless of Nike's intention, the advertisement leaves little for the viewer to look at besides a limited view of this particular area of the woman's body. In doing this, she becomes dehumanized and sexualized. As Goffman explained, when females are presented as a commodity, their subjectivity and humanity is denied.

Recommendations

A more effective approach would have been to show the woman's body in its entirety, actually engaging in physical activity. By seeing the woman's face, we are better able to get a sense of her attitude, feelings and emotions. She becomes less like an object and more like a real person that women can relate to, giving the words on the ad actual meaning. By seeing her in action, we assert that body parts are meant to move, and not to looked at for their aesthetic value. It also promotes the importance of exercise and physical activity, rather than a body type. We also get a better sense of how the actual product plays a part in the exercise, workout or sport being played. Nike failed to communicate that with great physical achievement (as suggested in the text of ad) comes great mental strength and confidence. That cannot be communicated through a simple picture of a woman's thigh or derrière. Nike failed to present women with anything relatable.

What Nike did communicate throughout each ad is that beauty and aesthetics is important. One ad reads, "My Legs. They are revered. Envied for their strength. Honored for their beauty." By attributing words like "revered," "honored" and "envied" to

something aesthetic, the advertisement contributes to society valuing people on the basis of physical appearance rather than inner qualities or strength. These ads also demonstrate Leon Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which states we seek out individuals with highly valued assets with whom to compare ourselves. Each ad sends the message that the size, shape and strength of each body part are very desirable. In one ad, the woman's rear (shown in small spandex shorts that barely cover her bum) is described as "a space heater for my side of the bed," implying that a big butt is a sexually desirable object. As Goffman explained that advertisements are used to show us what is acceptable and desired, the ad suggests that a perfectly round, toned behind promises companionship. She has someone to share her bed with, suggesting she's sexually desirable. The backside depicted in the ads communicates a message that perfect, athletic shape should be the ultimate goal. Beyond objectification, the woman is now depicted as a sex object defining what and whom society deems sexy. This attributes to additional feelings of inadequacy, and a desire to attain a physique that will make one appear sexually desirable.

Nike's depiction of women's athletic bodies remains true to their core audience, women who are not waif thin, but not obese either. However, Nike clearly stated that they intended to create a campaign that resonated with the average American woman by presenting what is "real" instead of what is "ideal." In order to resonate with American woman, Nike must create an emotional connection with women. A certain level of transparency is needed in order for women to relate to the ads. A better approach would be for Nike to create advertisements in which we feel like we know the woman in the

advertisement by presenting her story and her background, details that connect us to her and her relatable.

Further, if Nike's goal is to truly make an impact on issues of self-esteem among young women, then the ads should show a more diverse range of body types that average women can relate to. One recommendation is to use real athletes, ranging from young girls to college-aged athletes in the ads. The various representations of female athleticism and strength would allow for more relatable, realistic narrations within the ads. In order to promote the idea of embracing one's body and self-acceptance, marketers must refrain from making the outward appearance the focus of the advertisement. Women must be able to make a connection with the ad, in which no single body part or body type is highlighted. Rather, the message and overall tone of the ad should be to value inward qualities, such as strength, ambition, power, and courage rather than continued value placed on aesthetic beauty.

Conclusion: Future Implications

The most disappointing aspect of Nike's campaign was that it intended to be an innovative and refreshing campaign that real women could relate to. Yet in this endeavor, they continued to reinforce the objectification of women. The Nike campaign failed to connect with their audience or empower and inspire women. Despite gravitation away from disturbingly thin models and highly sexualized images, the campaign still remained a reflection of a deeper issue within American society. The immense value placed on aesthetics and the depiction of women as objects remains a frightening reality. As Kilbourne (1999) noted, "Far from being a passive mirror of society, advertising is an

effective and pervasive medium of influence and persuasion, often subtle and primarily unconscious. It is both a creator and perpetuator of the dominant attitudes, values, and ideology of the culture, the social norms, and myths by which most people govern their behavior." Nike remains the world's largest sporting company (Cendrowski 2011). Their impact and influence cannot be understated. If empowering women and creating a new standard is truly Nike Women's endeavor, they must deter from being another medium in which the attitudes and values of society are perpetuated. Rather than being a "passive mirror of society," they must rewrite the attitudes, values and ideology of a culture that places its value on beauty and sex, above all else. While the feminist movements brought great strides for American women, there is much ground to be covered. Nike, and other companies whose goal is to empower women, must stray away from destructive messages. By objectifying women, advertisers trivialize and silence women, further fueling larger societal concerns. Instead, create advertisements that values strength, ambition, determination, integrity and health. If aesthetic beauty and sex continue to be advertisers' focus, then that will remain what society values.

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