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Preface

I could stand in front of a mirror and pick my body apart. If I made all the changes I wished for, you probably wouldn't even recognize me. I have long had struggles with my body image, always wanting to change something. It wasn't until I came to Oxbow that I started to gain some self-respect and confidence. And though I have come far, I still have a ways to go. I have been thinking about my body and body image a lot lately and it felt appropriate to focus my research on something that has had such a large impact on my life. I don't doubt for a second that the advertisements I have been exposed to throughout my life have something to do with my low self esteem.

We are all bombarded with thousands of different advertising images on a daily basis. Everywhere you turn, advertisements are sending strong messages of sexism. Many a time I have been flipping through the latest issue of Vogue or Instyle and have been disgusted by the way women are portrayed in these advertisements. As a woman, I have always hated how the advertisements suggested that the ideal woman is a fragile, weak creature. Ever since I was little, I detested it. The average American is exposed to more than 3,000 advertisements a day¹. I have always felt that something with this much influence in our daily lives should show us something good to aspire to other than a feeble object of sexual desire.

Introduction

If life were the way it is depicted in the advertising world, I would be living a drastically different life. I would be about five foot eleven and weigh approximately 115 pounds. I would have perfect skin, teeth whiter than snow, and hair perfect and silky even after a long nights sleep with my perfect boyfriend in our perfect apartment. I can guarantee that this is not my life, nor is it anyone else's. This is a fake reality that is unachievable, even to the models. With the amount of makeup, time, and Photoshop used, there is no way the models can look that way in the real world. This shows that physical appearance is still very important to women. Traditionally, a woman's main goal in life was to find a husband and her physical appearance played a major role in her pursuit.

Women have come very far from where we once were; however, we still have a ways to go. Yes, we have laws that let us vote, give us equal opportunities, and compared to many other nations considered equal or almost equal to men. Women are constantly devaluing themselves because of the images we are surrounded by that are giving us beauty standards that are impossible to reach. While women are constantly setting themselves up for disaster, men are constantly being told to be more successful and aggressive. Most of the 3,000 advertisements' affect us on a subconscious level and have longer lasting effects. The way advertising is portraying gender and gender roles are having devastating effects on our society and our health.

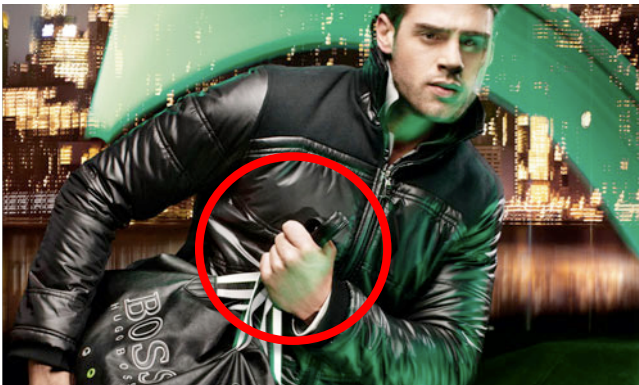
¹ *Killing Us Softly 4*. By Jean Kilbourne. Perf. Jean Kilbourne. Media Education Foundation, n.d. DVD. *Documentary Lovers*. Web. 6 Nov. 2012. <<http://documentarylovers.net/killing-us-softly-4-advertising-women/>>.

Body Language

Gender roles in advertising go much deeper than just blatant displays of sexism. Body language gets a very strong message across in a very subtle way. According to Sut Jhally, the way women's hands are portrayed as opposed to men's hands is a very good example of this. Female hands are often depicted as soft and caressing. They are often shown cradling items and often hold things with only their fingertips. This gives the viewer of the advertisement a sense that the model is not completely in control of her environment. Women are often shown touching themselves their faces, shoulders or arms, but really, you see models touching themselves anywhere. This shows that they are fragile, frail beings, trying to protect themselves. In contrast, male hands give the sense that they are in complete control of their environment². They are often powerful and



From: Life in a Venti Cup



From: Male Model Portfolios

assertive, utilizing their entire hand to grab something. Men are very rarely shown touching themselves the way women do. This idea of male body language consistently shows the male as the opposite of the female and vice versa.

Body language can be applied again to the entire body of the woman. Female models are often laying down and lounging³. It is very difficult to defend yourself in this position and it gives a sense of

passive powerlessness. This pose is often sexualized as well, by implying a sexual encounter is has or is about to take place. When women are standing up, they are very rarely standing sturdily. Frequently, the model is bending her knee, which implies she is

² *The Codes of Gender*. By Sut Jhally. Dir. Sut Jhally. Perf. Sut Jhally. *Films For Action*. Films For Action, 12 Jan. 2012. Web. 8 Nov. 2012.

<http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/the_codes_of_gender_2009/>.

³ *The Codes of Gender*. By Sut Jhally. Dir. Sut Jhally. Perf. Sut Jhally. *Films For Action*. Films For Action, 12 Jan. 2012. Web. 8 Nov. 2012.

<http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/the_codes_of_gender_2009/>.

Killing Us Softly 4. By Jean Kilbourne. Perf. Jean Kilbourne. Media Education Foundation, n.d. DVD. *Documentary Lovers*. Web. 6 Nov. 2012. <<http://documentarylovers.net/killing-us-softly-4-advertising-women/>>.

not grounded. It is not unusual that a woman will be holding her foot or heel. This too give a sense of not being grounded and teetering, giving the viewer a sense of vulnerability and defenselessness.

The head, too, frequently says a lot about the model, conveying a lot to the viewer. It is not unusual for a female model to have her head tilted, again giving a feeling of off balance, defenselessness. This pose is very frequently sexualized because a titled head is a sign of interest, often in another person. Often, women are shown with their head lifted back, exposing their neck, which is very vulnerable body part⁴. This pose suggests that the model has accepted her vulnerability. In addition to being vulnerable, women are often depicted as not being fully aware of her surroundings. She is often presented as being nervous, depicting this by biting her lip. This also plays into women being portrayed as young girls might be portrayed, however, the model sexualizes

this by flirtatiously turning the situation into a sexual encounter.

Female models are almost always depicted as being passive and sexually available.

The advertising industry takes the differences between males and females and exaggerates them. This is

why males are depicted as almost the complete opposite of how females are depicted. Men are rarely lying down and when they are, it's usually in bed with a woman. When they stand, they stand completely grounded, not bending their knees or tilting their heads. Frequently, male models are staring straight at the camera, with their head slightly tilted down, giving the feeling of seeing an animal stalking its prey. When they are standing their hands are often in their pockets. This shows ease, confidence, and strength. It gives the viewer a sense of comfort and control. When the model's hands are not in his pockets, they are usually crossed over his chest. This also gives the viewer a sense of comfort and control; however, this gives another feeling of intimidation and threat. He seems prepared and confident about his current situation. When the model is not portrayed as being in control of himself, he gives of a sense of relaxed calm. He is depicted as being laid back and grounded. He is almost always active in his environment,



From: Tumblr

⁴ *The Codes of Gender*. By Sut Jhally. Dir. Sut Jhally. Perf. Sut Jhally. *Films For Action*. Films For Action, 12 Jan. 2012. Web. 8 Nov. 2012. <http://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/the_codes_of_gender_2009/>.

as opposed to the passive female model. Muscles and activity go hand in hand and often, there is a very large amount of focus on the man's muscles. Like the female models, the male models have bodies that most men don't. Males often have powerful, strong bodies that the viewer knows is the "type of body that you do not mess with". The way males and females are portrayed in advertising, makes them seem like they are two different species, instead of two genders of the same species.

Implications about Gender

Since the advertising industry has amplified the differences between males and females, it is no surprise that these two genders have developed very different social traits. Femininity is thought of as submissive, powerless and



From: The Fashioner

and incredibly dependent on others, especially on males. Women are sexually available and much more emotional than males. I want to make it clear that I do not think it is wrong for women to want to be sexy and beautiful, but sexiness is thrust upon girls at such a young age to the point where other important personality traits are thought to be unimportant. Males, however, are powerful and depicted as the grown-up or the one in control. Men are in control of their emotions; they are self-assured and poised. Traits that are considered feminine (emotion, vulnerability, compassion, etc) have become somewhat of a taboo when men express these traits. These are traits that men do have, but as a society we've made it wrong for them to show traits that are traditionally thought of as feminine.

Societal Affects

Although we might not be aware of it, these advertisements do affect the way we see ourselves. Most of what we take away from these advertisements is subconscious. Though we might not necessarily realize it, often when one looks at an advertisement, we think that's what they should be like. This is because advertisements fulfill the role of telling us who we are and who we should be. Feminist speaker and filmmaker, Jean Kilbourne, focuses on the image of women in advertising. In her film Killing Us Softly



From: SHEfinds

4, Jean Kilbourne informed her viewers, “Ads sell a great deal more than products. They sell values, images, and concepts of success and worth, love and sexuality, popularity and normalcy.” We compare our lives to the fake lives we see in advertisements and we strive for our lives to be as perfect as those in the advertisements.

Failure is inevitable when striving for this perfection because it is impossible and fake. A lifetime of self-deprecation and no self-worth follows the failure of perfection. In 2011, a film was released, exploring the misrepresentation of women in the media and the national effects that it has caused. According to studies in Miss Representation, 53% of 13-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies, 78% of 17-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies, and 65% of women/girls have an eating disorder. After constantly being told they are not good enough so many times, women start to agree.

Women in America spend more money on cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, and other

procedures and products in their pursuit to be like the “perfect” models then they spend on their own education. American journalist, Lisa Ling, made an appearance on Miss Representation saying, “As a culture, women are brought up to be fundamentally insecure and always looking for the time when that knight on a horse will come and rescue us or provide for us.” Women are taught that they will never be beautiful enough and that they need a man to complete them. This is not true.

Not only do women under value themselves, but the advertising industry does as well. Women’s bodies are constantly being turned into objects. This is incredibly dehumanizing and as Jean Kilbourne pointed out, dehumanizing someone is almost always the first step in violence against that person⁵. Often in advertisements, violence towards women is eroticized, which is very dangerous to our safety. As Jena Kilbourne was talking about female objectification, she made a point of saying, “Girls are encouraged to objectify themselves and to obsess about their sex appeal and appearance at absurdly young ages, while boys get the message that they should seek sex but avoid intimacy. These messages shape their gender identity, sexual attitudes and behavior, values, and their capacity for love, connection, and healthy relationships well into adulthood.” When we are constantly seeing these images, we feel that they embody what we should act like. When a young boy repeatedly sees images of violent males, he will get the message that’s what he should be. These images have profound effects on us.

⁵ *Killing Us Softly 4*. By Jean Kilbourne. Perf. Jean Kilbourne. Media Education Foundation, n.d. DVD. *Documentary Lovers*. Web. 6 Nov. 2012. <<http://documentarylovers.net/killing-us-softly-4-advertising-women/>>.

Women never seem to be happy with their bodies and this is understandable. They are constantly flooded with images of models that are incredibly thin while simultaneously being told that's what they should look like. Less than 5% of women have the body type of a model, and it's not bad to have that body type, but it is excluding over 95% of women. The average model weighs 23% less than the average woman. Women are constantly striving to make their bodies like these models, which is very unhealthy and our obsession with skinniness is a public health problem. Obsessions with skinniness can very quickly evolve into eating disorders.

Although the specific cause of eating disorders is unknown, most doctors would argue it is a combination of biological, behavioral, and social factors. Advertisements would very easily fall under social factors. Statistically, 1 in 25 girls/ women will have anorexia at one point in their lives⁶. Doctor Anne Becker did a study in Fiji when television was first introduced on the main island. Traditionally, bodies that are bigger are considered more beautiful because it means your family and village is able to feed you well. In Doctor Becker's study, two samples of schoolgirls were compared, one of them was from before television was introduced and the second was after television was introduced. Before television was introduced, 3% of girls said they had vomited to control their weight. After television was introduced, 15% of girls admitted to vomiting to control their weight⁷.

In a study discussed in Killing Us Softly 4, girls who are exposed to sexualized images at young age tend to be more prone to the three most common mental health problems for women and girls. These mental health problems are depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. Yes, eating disorders. In an American Psychology Association report, it was stated that self-objectification is a national epidemic. People who self-objectify are more likely to be depressed, have eating disorders and have lower confidence. They have lower ambition, lower cognitive function and lower grade point averages. 67 countries in the world have had female presidents or prime ministers; however, The United States is not one of those countries. Jennifer Siebel Newsom, filmmaker and spokesperson for women, directed a documentary about media's limiting portrayal of women. In Miss Representation, Newsom states, "If the media is sending girls the message that their value lies in their bodies, this can only leave them feeling disempowered and distract them from making a difference and becoming leaders." Our government, the thing that is supposed to represent our population as a whole, is made up predominantly of males. If girls are constantly being told they are not good enough, they will strive to be good enough, not excellent and most certainly not leaders. The whole country is being affected by this, as well as the individuals. The effects of this are clear and they consist of nothing good.

Tactics in Advertising

⁶ Harb, Cindy. "Child Eating Disorders on the Rise - CNN.com." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 01 Jan. 1970. Web. 3 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/22/health/child-eating-disorders/index.html>>.

⁷ Goode, Erica. "Study Finds TV Alters Fiji Girls' View of Body." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 20 May 1999. Web. 12 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/20/world/study-finds-tv-alters-fiji-girls-view-of-body.html>>.

The advertising industry makes over 250 billion dollars a year and yet, we have no idea the kind of planning that goes into making the advertisements. An inconceivable amount of time is spent to make sure these advertisements effect us the way they do, whether its conscious or subconscious. As Jean Kilbourne put it,

“The fact is that much of advertising's power comes from this belief that advertising does not affect us. The most effective kind of propaganda is that which is not recognized as propaganda. Because we think advertising is silly and trivial, we are less on guard, less critical, than we might otherwise be. It's all in fun; it's ridiculous. While we're laughing, sometimes sneering, the commercial does its work.”

According to Paul Suggett, advertising expert, humans have a “reptilian brain” which responds to primal urges such as sex and reproduction. When an advertising agency has one page out of eighty pages to catch the reader’s attention and get the reader to remember the product, its no surprise sex is used so often because it really does sell. I do not think it is necessarily wrong to use sex to sell, it’s just the way it is done. If the only type of women that are portrayed as sexy are young, thin, “perfect” women, what kind of message is that sending? A bad one. It’s sending a message that the *only* way to be sexy is if you are perfect, young, and thin and this is an unattainable aspiration. Kilbourne points out, “The problem isn’t sex, it is the trivialization of sex. It’s the culture’s pornographic attitude towards sex.” The way sex is portrayed in advertising rejects any type of emotional intimacy. And yet, it still works, sex still sells and makes money for the advertising industry.

Not only is sex being used to sell products, most advertising is based on the viewer feeling anxious and insecure. It taps into our insecurities so we will buy the product to make us feel better about ourselves. When it comes down to it, everything is done is for money. Whether it’s to make money or save money, it’s all about money. The advertising industry is making money using their current tactics, so why would they change them?

Conclusion

The way gender is portrayed in advertising does nothing but negatively affect our society. It is unhealthy for almost everyone involved. It is unhealthy for the viewer; it is unhealthy for the model. One might think that the advertisers health is not affected because they are making money, however, this is not true. By exploiting others for financial benefit, their mental health is also impacted. Getting into the mind set that objectifying others in this manner is okay, their out look on the rest of the world is impacted. They may take the way they look at the models and apply that to everyday situations. However, it does not have to be this way. The government has the power to pass laws like minimum body mass indexes for models. Advertisers should have to legally say when it has been altered on the computer. Schools should be required to teach media literacy.

Something that has such a large impact on our lives could do something positive for us instead of negatively affecting our health and body image. As consumers in a supply and demand economy, it is up to us to change this. As well known journalist and

newscaster, Katie Couric, exclaimed in Miss Representation, “The media can be an instrument of change, it can maintain the status quo and reflect the views of the society or it can, hopefully, awaken people and change minds. I think it depends on who’s piloting the plane.” We can use this as a tool to better our selves and our society and we must act soon. If we don’t do something now, where will we be in 20 or 30 years? Jean Kilbourne informs her audience in Killing Us Softly 4, “Sometimes people say to me: ‘you’ve been talking about this for 40 years. Have things gotten any better?’ And actually I have to say, really they’ve gotten worse.” We are in a downward spiral and we must fight for change.

When women are taught to aspire to be an accessory to their man, their self-worth plummets. When women are taught to be strong, powerful and successful individuals, they become confident and thriving. Great things can be done in this country once women become appreciated for more than their bodies.