

Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising

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Women's bodies have been used whole, or in parts, to market everything from brassieres to monkey wrenches. One effect of such ads is to give women unrealistic notions of what they should look like. After instilling anxiety and insecurity in women, the ads imply that buying consumer products can correct practically any defect, real or imagined. Moreover, the women's magazines that could be telling the truth about such marketplace fraud are largely co-opted by their advertisers. Nor are men immune from exploitation. As more idealized male bodies appear in ads, men may, at last, really understand what upsets women about the way they are depicted in ads. In addition to reinforcing sexist notions about ideal woman and manhood, ads exploit sexuality. Many products are pitched with explicit sexual imagery that borders on pornography. Not only do these ubiquitous images encourage us to think of sex as a commodity, but they often reinforce stereotypes of women as sex objects and may contribute to violence against women.

2. _____

Fourteen-year-old Lisa arranges herself in the mirror – tightening her stomach, sucking in her cheeks, puffing her lips into an approximation of a seductive pout. It's no use, she thinks, as she glances down at the open magazine on her dresser table. I'll never look like the women in the ads. She flips through the pages, studying the beautiful women with their slender hips, flawless skin, and silky hair. Well, maybe if I lost twenty pounds, she thinks, pinching her baby-fat tummy with an acid feeling of despair. Or if I had the right clothes and makeup...

3. _____

EVERYWHERE WE TURN, ADVERTISEMENTS tell us what it means to be a desirable man or woman. For a man, the message is manifold: he must be powerful, rich, confident, athletic. For a woman, the messages all share a common theme: She must be "beautiful." Advertising, of course, did not invent the notion that women should be valued as ornaments; women have always been measured against cultural ideals of beauty. But advertising has joined forces with sexism to make images of the beauty ideal more pervasive, and more unattainable, than ever before.

4. _____

In her 1991 book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf compares the contemporary ideal of beauty to the Iron Maiden, a medieval torture device that enclosed its victims in a spike-lined box painted with a woman's image. Like the Iron Maiden, the beauty ideal enforces conformity to a single, rigid shape. And both cause suffering – even death – in their victims.

5. _____

The current Iron Maiden smiles at us from the pages of *Vogue* magazine. She's a seventeen-year-old professional model, weighing just 120 pounds on a willowy 5'10" frame. Her eyes are a deep violet-blue, her teeth pearly white. She has no wrinkles, blemishes – or even pores, for that matter. As media critic Jean Kilbourne observes in *Still Killing Us Softly*, her groundbreaking film about images of women in advertising, "The ideal cannot be achieved; it is inhuman in its flawlessness. And it is the only standard of beauty – and worth – for women in this culture."

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6. _____

The flawlessness of the Iron Maiden is, in fact, an illusion created by makeup artists, photographers, and photo retouchers. Each image is meticulously worked over: Teeth and eyeballs are bleached white; blemishes, wrinkles, and stray hairs are airbrushed away. According to Louis Grubb, a leading New York retoucher, "Almost every photograph you see for a national advertiser these days has been worked on by a retoucher to some degree Fundamentally, our job is to correct the basic deficiencies in the original photograph or, in effect, to improve upon the appearance of reality." In some cases, a picture is actually an amalgam of body parts of several different models – a mouth from this one, arms from that one, and legs from a third. By inviting women to compare their unimproved reality with the Iron Maiden's airbrushed perfection, advertising erodes self-esteem, then offers to sell it back – for a price.

7. _____

The price is high. It includes the staggering sums we spend each year to change our appearance: \$33 billion on weight loss; \$7 billion on cosmetics; \$300 million on cosmetic surgery. It includes women's lives and health, which are lost to self-imposed starvation and complications from silicone breast implants. And it includes the impossible-to-measure cost of lost self-regard and limited personal horizons.

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Taken from :

<http://www.personal.kent.edu/~glhanson/readings/advertising/womeninads.htm>

PART 1. GENERAL UNDERSTANDING

Choose one statement below that you consider is right about the text you have just read.

- A. This text is about the way men treat women on a daily basis.
- B. This text denounces the impact advertisements have on women's psychology.
- C. This text praises the advertisers for showing women as they really are.

PART 1. GIVE EACH PARAGRAPH THE RIGHT TITLE

A modernized torture device
Artificial beauty: a costly swindle
What we should all look like... and can't
The cost of advertisement-induced complexes
The despair of a 14-year-old
Women's bodies made into marketing tools
You can't be perfect, so you're worthless

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DETAILED UNDERSTANDING

Cite the extracts of the text to justify the following statements.

- This text shows men are also beginning to suffer from the way they are portrayed in the media.

- This text shows that women's magazines are partly responsible for the propagation of an illusory ideal of feminine beauty.

- This text tends to prove that advertisement has an impact on sexual behaviors.

- This text hints that advertisement have a torturing effect on the minds of women.

- This text makes it clear that the ideal beauty in advertisements is a means to extort money.

