**American Consumerism:**

**The Effects of Gender Representation in Advertising**

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Advertising, in many ways, is both a science and an art form; it requires extensive knowledge on human behavior and psychology, as well as creative and unique techniques in order to master the art of persuasion. This persuasive power is reflected in the development of the vast consumer culture in the United States - arguably one of the most materialistic cultures in the world today - where “consumers are motivationally empty until injected by marketers with wants created by advertising” (Sirgy, 2012, p. 80). Many advertising critics blame the field for propagating materialism by concentrating on “what we have (material possessions), not what we are (being human)” (Sirgy, 2012, p. 80). Materialism, at its highest level, allows possessions to “assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life” (Belk, 1984, p. 291). However, studies often show that “dissatisfaction with life, not satisfaction, is the result of a materialistic orientation” (Sirgy, 2012, p. 82).

This dissatisfaction is prominent in the beauty industry and the skewed representation of women in advertising, which “can serve to undermine as well as advance the gender transformation that society is attempting to realise” (Slachmuijlder, 2000, p. 98). Due to its persuasive nature, advertising “frequently attempts to reflect people's aspirations,” and can subsequently “strongly impact, limit or expand, the perceptions of one's own reality and potential” (Slachmuijlder, 2000, p. 98).

Historically, advertising has been a predominantly male-run industry despite early attempts in American history to include women because ad agencies “felt that only women could think like women” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 163). This notion - introduced in the 1920s - was overshadowed by the 1950s increased emphasis on “psychoanalytic ad pitches and sociological theories” which proposed the idea that “experts, including men, could crack the code for reaching female consumers” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 163). The advertisements depicting women that came out of this era presented “devotion to family and home as the ideal,” especially in post-World War II society which often included “historically inspired styles of decorating and entertaining” now available to women due to the “increasing availability of time-saving appliances and products like cake mixes and TV dinners” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 168).

Advertisement strategies such as this were analyzed and criticized with the growing feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, most notably in the work of Betty Friedan’s 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, which “lambasted Madison Avenue’s ‘sexual sell’ for binding womanhood with consumption” and blamed this “‘obsolete image of femininity’ for obscuring feminist history and stifling women’s professional ambitions in order to peddle products” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 163). Friedan’s argument is similar to the argument found in Elizabeth Hardwick’s article, “The Feminine Principle,” printed in a 1958 edition of the popular women’s magazine *Mademoiselle*. Hardwick encouraged contemporary women to observe history so that they might find “their nineteenth-century counterparts” suffering from “the same discontent in their restricted roles” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 170). However, due to the consumer culture of America, “modern women failed to analyze history through this lens of common experience because they focused on the superficiality of style” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 170). In response, Hardwick “urged readers to seek alternatives to mass culture” in order to combat this “false simplicity” of womanhood - if not, she predicted “‘hysteria and breakdown’ for the American woman who was rendered ‘as compliant as her dishwasher’” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 170).

A number of protests were launched in this era of feminism inspired by activists like Friedan and Hardwick, including the 1968 picket of the Miss America Pageant “for its repudiation of the ‘Consumer Con-Game’ used to sell products and beauty ideal” and “the sit-in against sexist content and male editorship at the *Ladies’ Home Journal*” (Westkaemper, 2017, pp. 164, 163). In the latter, the Media Women, “the group of feminist journalists that had conceptualized the protest,” negotiated to “expand professional opportunities for women writers,” an action which seemed to backfire when they received “harsh criticism from those who opposed accommodation to mainstream culture and who perceived elitism in writers’ advocacy for their own careers within a capitalist, hierarchical system that exploited women as consumers and secretarial workers” (Westkaemper, 2017, p. 164).

Research in gender theory has suggested that “advertising in popular media is a primary means for introducing female role stereotypes and promoting sexism” through the proposition of “lifestyles and forms of self-presentation that individuals use to define their roles” in society (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 102). Two distinct forms of sexism emerge in the discussion of advertisements: hostile and benevolent sexism. The first form - hostile sexism - can be found in the negative depiction of women as “unfit to make important decisions” and their representation as “easily manipulated, vulnerable, and weak” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 103). This form is often directed at women who refuse to conform to traditional gender roles defined by their societies. The second form - benevolent sexism - is far more subtle, eliciting “feelings of protectiveness and affection toward females, which are based on perceptions of their inferiority and inadequacy” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 103). This form promotes the “traditional subservient female roles” and is often found in superficial advertisements depicting women as overly concerned with “physical attractiveness” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 103).

In general, advertising has depicted women in four roles: “*traditional* roles (dependent and housewives),” “*decorative* roles (concerned with physical attractiveness and sex objects),” “*non-traditional* roles (non-traditional activities, career-oriented women and voices of authority),” and “*neutral* roles (portrayed as equal to men)” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 103). A study conducted in 2008 found that within the realm of online advertising women are most often portrayed within the first two roles (traditional and decorative), revealing the fields underlying support of sexism. The study found most women were depicted in decorativeroles, “notably those ‘concerned with physical attractiveness’ (33.00%) and as ‘sex objects’ (17.50%),” amounting to “slightly more than half of the sample of advertisements” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 106). The second largest chunk was the portrayal of women in traditional roles, which amounted to 18% of the sampled advertisements, specifically in “dependency roles in 2.84% and as housewives in 15.16%” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 106).

Surprisingly, the study discovered that “female-audience web pages were likely to portray female models in decorative roles supporting sexism” more so than websites aimed at “male or general internet audiences” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 107). These websites specifically depicted women concerned with physical attractiveness, revealing the industries attempts to “create and exploit anxiety of women to meet frequently unrealistic beauty standards set by online advertisements of global products” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 107).

This study showcases the ethical conflict of gender representation within the advertising industry, since the industry’s “most susceptible targets” are the women who identify with these stereotypical depictions and attempt to embody the “appropriate” roles shaped by their society (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 109). The continued portrayal of women in these sexist roles (as subservient sex objects who live in to service others) suggests that women are treated “as a commodity, as a means to something else, rather than ends to themselves” (Cohan, 2001, p. 329).

A study done two-decades before (in 1988) reflected similar trends in female representation in advertisements: “Male voices are much more likely than female voices to be used in voiceovers, women are portrayed as young more often than men, and men are more likely to be portrayed in independent roles whereas women are portrayed in roles relative to others” (Gilly, 1988, p. 83). One would think this sexist representation would have changed over the course of twenty years, yet societal gender roles “continue to change and expand at a faster rate than the advertisers' response,” and the images of women reflect “the status quo of a time gone by” (Courtney, 1983, p. 24).

However, a study conducted in the early 1990s demonstrates that some women “are alert to female role portrayals in advertising” and their active observance effects their purchasing decisions; specifically, 63% of “upscale women… express their intent to discontinue using a product associated with demeaning sexual stereotypes” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 110). But “upscale” women are not the only ones fighting against these sexual stereotypes; in a 2003 study of the US beauty industry and their advertisements, researchers discovered that an “overwhelming majority” of Black women “expressed discomfort with the way the media defines beauty” (Sekayi, 2003, p. 474).

American pop culture has placed significant importance on the “socially ideal body” (including body shape, skin color and hair texture) which has become “synonymous with beauty, success, health, and self-control” (Sekayi, 2003, p. 469). The current Eurocentric characterization of “beauty” arose with the arrival of models like Twiggy in the 1960s, forever shifting American society away from average-sized and more voluptuous women. This concept of beauty is linked to the sexist portrayal of women’s nature as “frail and delicate,” implying that women who physically embodied such characteristics were more feminine, and seen as “sylphlike and demure, a model of propriety who deserves the admiration and protection of men” (Mazur, 1986, p. 284). Such standards of beauty consistently excluded women of African descent, except for those (such as actress Halle Berry) who met the Eurocentric ideals including “light skin, slim bodies, and straight hair” (Sekayi, 2003, pp. 468-69).

While popular media is making more attempts to include a wider range of ethnicities and body types under the umbrella of “beautiful,” this Eurocentric standard has remained the most prominent. Women who do not conform to this standard, such as Black women, are “forced into a state of double-consciousness” - uncomfortable and even outraged by the constant reminder of beauty expectations perpetuated by the media, but resigned to the reality and understanding that “whether or not they embrace [this reality] as their own, they will be judged according to it” (Sekayi, 2003, p. 474).

Among the realm of advertising, the beauty industry has been found especially guilty of perpetuating these unrealistic standards and “selling an idea of beauty that has become less in tune with reality over time” (O’Neil, 2014, p. 620). These accusations have grown steadily over the years, “particularly in the wake of growing numbers of eating disorders among young girls and women,” and the world has seen “increasing concern about the effects of advertisements on body image and self-esteem” (O’Neil, 2014, p. 620).

The beauty industry “includes make-up, skin and hair care products, perfumes, cosmetic surgery, health clubs, and weight loss products” that accumulate to form a multi-billion-dollar global industry (O’Neil, 2014, p. 620). Advertisements for beauty products often rely on the use of attractive models in-line with the Eurocentric standard of beauty, continuously promoting “an unattainable ideal of beauty” in order to increase sales of “products that promise eternal beauty” (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 109). Within a culture obsessed with the consumption of mass media, the constant bombardment of such images “negatively affect[s] the self-confidence of women” and leads to the development of low self-esteem and eating disorders (Plakoyiannaki, 2008, p. 109).

There have been attempts to minimize such effects through stricter advertising regulations in foreign countries, such as the United Kingdom and France, yet the US “is more lax than other countries in its regulation of advertising” due to the “great protection” outlined in the first amendment (O’Neil, 2014, p. 621). While the US advertising industry has a self-regulatory body similar to those found in the UK and France, the industry is ultimately regulated by the government’s Federal Trade Commission (FTC), as well as some forms of legislation under the commercial free speech doctrine, meaning that “advertising regulation… is ultimately beholden to the First Amendment protection of free speech” (O’Neil, 2014, p. 629). In contrast, advertisements for beauty products in the UK are held to a much higher standing, including the substantiation of any claims by cosmetic products to “cure” or “rejuvenate,” the prohibition of targeting consumers under eighteen for weight-loss products (“either directly or through appealing content”), and the designation of “advertisements and other marketing communications that deal with weight and weight-control” as “subject to a ‘high level of scrutiny’” (O’Neil, 2014, pp. 624-25).

There has also been a global increase in regulations concerning digitally altered images. The UK proposed a “warning system” for advertisements containing digitally altered images. The system would rate photos between one and four (along with a “corresponding explanation of the changes”), with a four designating “images with significant enhancements” or “digital cosmetic surgery,” while a one would signify smaller changes, such as “enhancements to the lighting or background of the photo” (O’Neil, 2014, p. 626). France proposed similar legislation concerning altered images, arguing that by “creating unrealistic expectations about what is beautiful” such “advertisements are misleading to the public” (O’Neil, 2014, pp. 628-29). Other countries such as Brazil and Australia followed these examples and soon proposed similar legislation regarding digitally altered photos.

One reason why these foreign countries have progressed farther is because “consumers have taken an active role in advertising regulation, especially in relation to the depictions of women in advertisements” (O’Neil, 2014, p. 639). Yet the Unites States still lags behind, ignoring the detrimental effects of advertising’s unequal representation on society, and placing the advertisement industry’s right of “free speech” above the protection of consumers. The scales are still out of balance: women are continuously portrayed as sex objects, as housewives and dependents, undermining societies’ expanding gender roles; women are bombarded with images of unobtainable and unrealistic beauty, causing an increase in low self-esteem and eating disorders, especially among women of color. If the advertising industry will not address these issues, then it is up to consumers to step in and say *enough* - but that is much easier said than done in a materialistic society.

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