

Many Advertisements Are Sexist

Advertising, 2010

Portia, "Sexist Advertising," *Muse Feminist Magazine*, October 2005. All content copyright © 2005 Muse Feminist Magazine. Reproduced by permission.

"Our society has sexism so ingrained in it that advertising simply follows suit."

Portia is an industrial and workplace relations lawyer raised in Wellington, New Zealand. In the following viewpoint, Portia charges that the advertising industry regularly depicts scenarios and stereotypes that are sexist and degrading to women in magazines, commercials, and campaigns. She claims that the use of female nudity and overly sexual messages act as a form of propaganda, which objectifies women, condones domestic violence, and reinforces demeaning behaviors and ideas. The author urges critics to challenge sexist advertising by analyzing the ads surrounding them and voicing their complaints to businesses and advertisers.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why is the "Fire Ho's" dance party promotion offensive, in Portia's view?
2. According to the author, what is "porno chic"?
3. What is the goal of sexist advertising, as stated by the author?

Sexist advertising—the definitive example that society is still laden with masculine values and that people accept sexist advertising as a legitimate form of commercial communication. Sexist advertising comes in all shapes and forms, such as reinforcing gender stereotypes and gender roles, using gratuitous female nudity or sex to sell unrelated products, and by marginalising women from advertising and its industry.

Sexist advertising and the sexualisation of women's bodies emanates from both problems with the advertising industry and society. These problems stem from a wee institution called patriarchy. Our society has sexism so ingrained in it that advertising simply follows suit. Therefore, images that objectify and degrade women's bodies are accepted as legitimate for advertising, under the guise of portraying a particular product (and therefore the consumer) as simply sexy, seductive and attractive to the opposite sex.

Serious Social Impacts

There are serious social impacts from this kind of advertising back on society—unrealistic expectations of women's bodies and resulting body image problems, sexual and domestic violence, and sexism being reinforced as an acceptable form of behaviour. Many forms of media such as magazines and television stations financially benefit from these sexist advertisements, as they gain the majority of their revenue from the companies who place ads with them. A major concern with sexist advertising is the simple fact that it becomes so normalised that we don't even notice it (either because it's subconscious, dressed up as artistic or because it's so widespread).

Now I'm a fan of calling a spade a spade, so I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that sexist advertising is simply a form of propaganda. Let's look at this from an academic point of view—in [the book] *Propaganda and Persuasion*, propaganda is defined as disseminating or promoting particular ideals, with the objective of

endeavouring to reinforce or modify the attitudes or behaviour of a particular audience. In fact, they argue that advertising campaigns are by definition "systematic propaganda", and label it "ubiquitous". In any case, it can certainly be said that advertising is a form of communication, and a form of dissemination of ideas (whether commercial or political ideas). Advertising aims to convince consumers of the worth of the company and its services or products, with the goal of persuading the consumer to buy the services and products of that company. Essentially, to reinforce the "brand" and modify the behaviour of the consumer to choose that particular brand.

The images that get used in advertising are therefore chosen for a reason, because they either symbolise a particular message or idea the advertiser wishes to promote, or because they reflect the consumer in some way—their image, their attitude, their style. Advertising seeks to draw consumers in a number of ways, but generally makes the product desirable by using images that trigger something in the consumer's mind so that they remember it favourably. As [authors Garth] Jowett and [Victoria] O'Donnell explain, it is "a series of appeals, symbols and statements deliberately designed to influence the receiver of the message toward the point of view desired by the communicator and to act in some specific way as a result of receiving the message...."

Here in lies the rub—we are being subconsciously enticed to buy products by companies who believe that it is okay to use women's bodies in a sexual way to make their brand cool, hip and sexy. And not only are men buying into these products because they are identifying with the product or brand, because the sexist 'propaganda' echoes their own perceptions about women, women's roles, and the proper image a woman should have, but women are too. Often women don't realise their sexual appeal is being exploited by the company to their detriment in society and to the company's financial benefit.

You may be wondering how this fits in with the 'Wellington/New Zealand' context. Sexist advertising and the sexualisation of women's bodies in advertisements is extremely common now. The images accompanying this article are some examples that the *Muse* [magazine] team photographed on billboards simply walking around Wellington one afternoon. The images mostly promote dance parties or music events, and the one I found most offensive was the "Fire Ho's" which used the play on words 'ho' (short for "whore") and "hose," i.e. fire hose. The image depicts a woman dressed in a skimpy firefighter's outfit holding a hose with legs suggestively spread. And what does this have to do with the gig we asked? We should have read the byline—"the girls are turnin' up the heat"—it all makes sense now (???!!). Another was for a medical-themed dance party, or that's the impression we got from the poster, which featured a porn-star nurse sitting on the amp. These advertisements are a pretty weak excuse to use a picture of a sexed-up woman

On a further inquiry, I looked into some magazines, and out of one issue of *Marie Claire* alone, I found fourteen advertisements that used women's bodies in a sexual way (either unrelated to the product or barely related by dint of it being 'skin care'). The ads in *Marie Claire* that I particularly found offensive were two Elle MacPherson lingerie ads which were part of a campaign featuring photos taken from angles imitating a peeping tom, voyeur or stalker. These images never showed the female model's face (but always the male model's), and involved dynamics of power imbalance. This included the female model being placed in a vulnerable or sexual position.

Porno Chic

The use of women's sexuality and the use of gratuitous female nudity in advertisements [has] been labelled "porno chic" by a Paris media watchdog group, and even within the advertising industry in France it is accepted that "nudity is invariably an excuse for bankruptcy of ideas". However, porno chic has been seen to represent economic optimism and liberation from confining societal (advertising) stereotypes. Advertisers argue they

should be allowed to shock their audience, make their campaigns a bit raunchier and show that ultimately their brand is edgy and at the front of fashion and culture. They probably don't even think about the consequences of using naked or semi-naked female bodies in sexual or suggestive positions to advertise shoes (just look at the Overland shoes ads on their Web site), or jeans (Levi's is pretty bad at doing this), or perfume, cosmetics or skin-care products like tanning oil and soap. You can be certain advertising executives don't wake up in the morning and say, "I wonder how my advertising campaign for Brand X beer impacts women's body image or men's view of women?" But when they pick images of women that are sexual they do so because it is what has always been done, because our patriarchal society dictates that the advertising industry employs male values of beauty and attractiveness and male ways of communicating or portraying people.

Each day we are faced with advertisements of a sexual nature, regardless of the product. The goal of this kind of propaganda, this commercial communication, is that if we buy this product we can look like the model, we will experience fulfilment by partaking in that brand's experience, we will be sexy and seductive like the woman in the ad. Why should we swallow that crap? We need to realise that this advertising is plain old sexist, and that in New Zealand there are rules about these kinds of images. The Advertising Standards Authority [ASA] has a set of codes for all forms of advertising and all subject matters. Of particular importance is its code for advertising using people—specifically, "Advertisements should not employ sexual appeal in a manner which is exploitative and degrading of any individual or group of people in society to promote the sale of products or services. In particular people should not be portrayed in a manner which uses sexual appeal simply to draw attention to an unrelated product".

If you see advertising that you think is offensive because it uses a nude or seminude woman in a sexual way, then make a complaint. The company can be forced to remove the advertisement if your complaint is upheld, and one complaint can be enough to do this—you don't need ten people to complain about the same thing (although this probably helps!). Take action, challenge sexist advertising. Take notice of your surroundings and analyse the advertisements—the only way to change the attitudes of advertising companies is if we tell them that sexist advertising is not okay, and that we are tired of the objectification of our bodies in order for companies ... [to] make a profit.

Further Readings

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