Representation of Women in Advertising

Clare Hoey
The Sydney Feminists
16 May 2018

Advertising is our environment. We cannot escape advertising, as its messages are inside our intimate relationships, our homes, our hearts, our heads (Burcar, 2010, 57–58). For women these messages often include harmful depictions of objectified and/ or sexualised images of women. This article explores how women are affected by advertisement first through explaining the role advertising plays in our culture, linking our cultural norms to how women are represented and touching upon sexualisation, normalisation of violence and the use of Eurocentric beauty standards. Focus will then turn to how taboo subjects such as menstruation are dealt with in advertising, arguing that advertisements hold a considerable amount of control over the dominant discourse surrounding these issues. Finally, this article will examine the impact advertising has on the women and girls that consume it, highlighting the detrimental impact on self-esteem. Through exploring how women are portrayed in advertising through these different angles this article hopes to provide the reader with an understanding of how advertisements treat women and the potential impact this may have on our culture.

Advertising is embedded within our everyday lives, Burcar (2010) estimates people living in the developed world see anywhere between 5,000 to 10,000 adverts per day. In order to understand the impact this environment has on us we first need to understand the wider cultural context within which these advertisements function. Yurtsever (2016) highlights that culture holds ruling ideologies and discourses that govern the way we perceive our world and ourselves. Culture controls what we see as 'natural' or 'obvious', and this often includes ideas relating to social positions or identity such as gender, race and class. As Burcar (2010) further explains, events and objects in life do not, inherently, have meaning; meaning is projected upon objects, and culture is a major way in which we do this. Advertisers draw on our culture's ruling ideologies in an attempt to get their product to connect with us on an emotional level.

Ross, Ridinger and Cuneen (2009) explain that we are in a postmodern age of advertisement, as modern advertising teaches us to consume not the product but its sign. Therefore, what the product stands for is more important than what it is in itself. This process invests a brand's symbol with 'cultural capital' Ashikali, and Helga Dittmar (2015). Cultural capital is a social theory from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930- 2002) which argues people within a society hold certain social assets. This may include education level, taste in music, dress style, food, speech, etc., all of which serve as indicators to which field (social class) an individual belongs. Advertisers draw on cultural capital within their advertisements to link their product with a certain social class or sub-culture, for example consider the difference between beer adverts by brand: same

product but vastly different adverts (e,g. Stella Artois vs Victoria Bitter). Consumers then use the product to either symbolise their social class or as an aspirational attempt at social mobility through cultural symbols. In a capitalist economic system, being a consumer is one of the fundamental ways in which an individual takes part in society, as consumption is a major part of our culture and culture is a fundamental part of how we understand the world and ourselves; advertising then becomes a way in which consumers understand, construct and present themselves (Ross, Ridinger and Cuneen, 2009)

<u>Advertisements provide a gauge for what is desirable and what is normal. Advertising serves to define, or frame, reality. For these reasons, the social impact of advertising cannot be overstated.</u>

Within advertisements, reinforcement and shaping of cultural ideas and norms, gender is probably the social resource that is drawn on most by advertisers (Ashikali and Helga Dittmar, 2015). Adverts that draw on gender tend to follow prevailing ideas of gender in western culture (Goffman (1979). For example, men are typically portrayed in dominant positions relative to women in a variety of consumption situations. These discourses generally depict men as "idealised" and women as "vulnerable" (Elliot and Elliott 2005).

Furthermore, the most pervasive representation of women in advertising is in the form of idealised beauty. The focus on female beauty seen throughout advertising is a reflection of western cultural expectations of women. Yurtsever (2016) explains the promotion of female beauty is in part a function of 'the gaze' or "the male gaze." In feminist theory, the gaze refers to the act of depicting women from a masculine, heterosexual point of view, often resulting in women being shown as a sexualised object of male desire Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011). The male gaze is not only tied to advertising, but is present throughout literature and art. Understanding the role of the gaze within advertising is important, as John Berger explains the potential impact this has on women in informing notions of identity:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This not only impacts the relationship between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves, as women internalise this message of objectification. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, p45, 1972)

This environment often manifests itself through self-monitoring. Today the male gaze can be understood not only as the male gaze sexualising women, but more generally as a force carrying ideas of normality within our society on racism, gender, ableism and classism.

<u>How are Women Represented?</u>

The message to both men and women is clear: A woman's value lies largely in terms of her appearance and sexuality. To illustrate this point, this section will examine the idea

of objectification and normalisation of violence towards women within advertising. In 1997 Plous and Neptune conducted a study comparing the rate of body exposure of women and men within advertising. They found that women's bodies occurred approximately four times as often as exposure of men's bodies (Darwin, 2017). More recently, Millard and Grant (2006) reported that approximately 30% of advertisements in three popular U.S. women's fashion magazines featured nude or scantily-clad women, and a 2008 study by Lindner reported that more than half of advertisements in a popular U.S. women's magazine portrayed women as objects.

In their comparison of magazine advertisements from 1983 to those from 1958 and 1970, Sullivan and O'Connor (1988) found a 60% increase in images that portrayed women in decorative and sexualized roles.

A worrying element within advertisement's objectification of women is the combination of sexualisation and use of violence towards women. According to Kilbourne (1999), the sexual victimisation of women that was once limited to pornography has found expression not only in films and television shows, but also in advertising. She argues the body positions, facial expressions, and sexual power relationships between men and women that occur in advertising have often been adopted from violent pornography.

The sexualisation of women's bodies within advisements is present within advertisements aimed at both men and women, creating a strong cultural message that women's bodies are constantly on display to be judged. Viewing images of sexually objectified women has been shown to increase men's acceptance of rape myths, interpersonal violence, and gender role stereotyping that violence is erotic Waal & McCabe (2016). Further research has consistently shown that exposure to both violent and nonviolent pornography results in attitudes supportive of sexual aggression among men (Malamuth et al. 2000).

More than 70 percent of the time in which women were portrayed as victims, they were simultaneously portrayed as sex objects.

A possible reason for this portrayal of women in advertising has been argued to be a backlash against women's increasing power in society. Women's growing equality, including greater economic independence, challenges our culture's existing gender roles and therefore men's dominance (Faludi 1991; Wolf 1991). The pervasiveness of media images of highly sexualised women -but not men- is hypothesized to draw on a male desire to maintain dominance through designating women's bodies as property that can be evaluated, ogled, and touched at the whim of men (Kilbourne 1999). Wolf (1990) further argues the sexualisation of women serves to undermine women's greater independence and increasing professional possibilities. Society is now demanding that women become servants to popular images of beauty and sexuality. These images pressure women to emulate them in order to feel beautiful/ accepted by society.

This has served as another mean to impose gender norms on women, creating a new social position for women in which they may challenge traditional gender norms, but not too much; a CEO, but still a mother, still with a clean home, still young and beautiful. (Wolf 1991, p. 4).

Diversity in Mainstream Advertising.

A lack of diversity is prevalent throughout representations of women in advertising. We do not often see marginalised women represented, which can include class, disability, weight, age, and non-binary people. This paper will focus on race as one example of how only a narrow percentage of the population is represented within advertising. White faces dominate advertising. As an example, 82.2% of models that walk in New York Fashion Week are white (Waal & McCabe (2016). Eurocentric beauty standards (a.k.a., the use of "white features" in advertising) may include straight, slim noses, lighter skin, straight hair, etc. To understand why the use of Eurocentric beauty standards is so widespread, imperialism and colonisation must be examined.

Burcar, L. (2010) explains our western beauty standards are inseparable from Racism, as they were constructed during Europe's imperialist expansion. The basis of our beauty ideals are largely set in ideas of inferiority and dehumanisation of non-European features. These notions were conceived during a time in which the west was seeking to colonise, dispossess and exterminate or enslave people of colour, partially through racial divisions in hierarchical "opposition to one another": making it appear natural that one feature is better than the other, rather than just different. In this process, "black people and blackness became defined as barbaric, savage, heathen and ugly; white people and whiteness were defined as civilized, modern, Christian and beautiful" (Burcar, 2010).

Bakir and Palan (2010) argue it is critical that we as society understand that our idea of beauty was conceived in this time and still informs our collective understanding of race today. Overtime, white features such as light skin, straight noses, and long, straight hair have taken on cultural meanings, perhaps most importantly the neutralisation of white physical features. This process allowed whiteness to become the norm: being white becomes the standard in society, making everything else a deviation. In the context of Western internal colonialism and external imperialism, the task of Eurocentric beauty ideology can be understood as a tool to uphold and naturalise the concept of white supremacy.

Adverts informs us of what is normal and what is desirable; the prevalence of white features in advertising communicates the idea that whiteness is the norm making all other ethnicities a deviation. In recent years there have been increased calls to decolonise the beauty industry, calling on advertisers in particular to diversify and

represent a greater range of ethnic groups. Burcar, L. (2010) argues, however, that it is not enough to simply put more diversity in adverts, we also need to explore the way in which adverts are presented. Do they account for the different experiences and worldviews? Bakir and Palan (2010) argue this would be a true representation of diversity, rather than placing greater diversity within a white context.

Taboo Subjects in Advertising: Menstruation and Female Body hair.

Our understanding of menstruation is socially constructed. Every culture has myths about menstruation. In premodern times it was believed that a menstruating woman could cause "meat to go bad, wine to turn, and bread dough to fall". (Diorio and Munro 2000; Fingerson 2006 and Chrisler 2013).

In contemporary Western society, dominant discourses construct menstruation largely as an unpleasant experience. Advertisements often present 'cures' for the ailments of menstruation, thus making menstruation something that needs control and treatment. This understanding becomes so embedded that we generally accept it as a common-sense reality that remains unchallenged. Furthermore, it is through these advertisements on television and in magazines that many girls and young women initially gain much of their awareness and understanding on menstruation.

Women's bodies are often treated as objects of beauty to be admired; at the same time, women's bodies are also often reviled with respect to their more functional natures.

Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011) argue that, given the taboo nature of menstruation in our culture, dominating public discourse is mostly constructed through the adverts of women's hygiene products. This has given these advertisements an especially large amount of control to construct much of the public discourse surrounding the menstrual cycle. Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011) highlight that advertisers have adapted their adverts to appear to conform with societal changes to attitudes relating to menstruation, for example many current menstruation product adverts are more likely to take an educational lens, presenting important knowledge. However, Simes and Berg (2001) and Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck (2009) found there was little useful information to be found in such advertisements, but rather the perpetuation of negative attitudes and views of menstruation. Likewise, many advertisements now show active healthy women, potentially offering a positive view of menstruation no longer being seen as problematic and disabling, offering women a new world outside of the old constructions of menstruation (Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck 2009).

However, another reading of these advertisements shows menstrual products being presented as the only way to ensure conformity to the social rules of menstruation. The modern women can be active, ongoing and attractive, not because the rules no longer apply, but rather because the 'right' product will ensure secrecy and cleanliness. The underlying message is still to hide your period. This message is further reinforced by the treatment of periods as a pain or medical problem to be fixed. Yurtsever (2016) argues this is in part because menstrual product companies construct their marketing campaigns to not only sell their product, but also produce feelings of brand loyalty and identity (Merskin 1999). When the influence of advertisers dominates the discourse of menstruation, it is in their best interest to promote the negative aspects of menstruation, to which their product will be the answer.

If femininity is thought of as a commodity (Goldman, 1992) and is available through purchase, then it is also possible to conceal femininity through purchase

The answer advertisers present is often ill structured though representations of the ideal feminine subject, who is fresh, clean, dressed in light tight clothing and often appears sexually available (Merskin 1999; Simes and Berg 2001; Erchull 2013). In presenting this image, menstrual product companies suggest their product eliminates the negative effects of menstruation and enable women to appear in an acceptable and appropriate manner. In this way, the advertisements can contribute to -rather than disrupt- the dominant discourses of shame and menstruation as an attack on femininity (Kane 1990; Merskin 1999).

Another taboo area in advertising for women is hair removal. Content analysis of representations of women's bodies in advertising reveals that certain bodily matter (such as fat) achieves relatively a routine representation, while others, such as women's body hair, remain inexplicably absent. Erchull (2013) points to the "real women" advertising movement highlighting that real people' imagery still reflects the gender ideals of the society that produced it. **Erchull, (2013)** argues hairy bodies do not fit into the "real women" advertising. Western women's body hair and body fat should theoretically share a similar stigma. Both traits threaten the Western cultural ideal of the contained female body, compromising cultural myths of women's naturalised hairlessness and hourglass figures (Longhurst 2001; Bordo 2003). Furthermore, both body hair and body fat are active and motile components of women's bodies that never truly go away; rather, these unruly bodily matters continually lurk just beneath the surface, rendering all women discreditable within the context of Western beauty culture (Colls 2007). The exception that proves the rule: 'real women' can be fat, wrinkled, scarred, and disabled, but they cannot be hairy. The real women advertising movement routinely challenges issues such as 'sizeism', racism, ageism, and sometimes even 'able-bodiedism'; however, even the most allegedly diverse campaigns tend to feature models who are uniformly hairless from neck to toe.

Advertisements for hair removal tend to reinforce the message that body hair is unfeminine. There was a recent controversy over an advert from the company Veet in which women were depicted turning into men as soon as their body hair begins to grow

back after shaving. As Waal Malefyt, T & McCabe, M. (2016) point out, the vast majority of hair removal adverts do not depict women with hair on their bodies; even when women are shown shaving, they shave hairless legs. An article by *Business week* (2012) on how Veet's attempts to established a market for their product in China -where body hair removal for women is not the norm- provides a real insight into how a taboo or shame may be constructed towards the body. When Reckitt Benckiser Group brought its Veet hair-removal cream to China in 2005, sales were sluggish. Most Chinese women don't have much body hair, and those who do didn't worry about it. So, the company embraced a new marketing plan. Reckitt Benckiser rolled out ads equating hair-free skin with health, confidence and "shining glory", positioning it as a product for women "for whom grooming is part of how she gets a promotion, a good husband, and a raise". "We've all been through it, that sudden realization that you're not prepared for anything," one pitch warns visitors to the site. "In fact you've got stubbly legs, a fuzzy bikini line, and you've just fallen head over heels in front of the whole office! It's moments like this you need Veet". Here again we can see an attempt to create a sense of shame over women's natural bodies through an appeal to societal norms which women are expected to live up to; thus, creating new societal norms by connecting them to existing cultural norms or aspirations, and linking their product to an idealised vision of the self.

The Impact and Implications this Environment has on Women and Girls.

Throughout this paper, the impact advertising has on women and girls has been touched upon. This chapter will explore the impact in greater depth. There is a significant amount of research regarding this topic and the results show damaging (read sexualized, objectified, passive) portrayals of women in the media These images are associated with negative outcomes for women including lower self-esteem poor body image, self-objectification and eating disorders.

This paper has already established that objectifying and sexualized portrayals of women in advertising, has been shown to negatively impact the way in which men and boys view women, showing they are more likely to endorse unrealistic standards for women's bodies (Hatoum & Belle, 2004), stereotype women (Rudman & Borgida, 1995), objectify women (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009; Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010), discriminate against women (Rudman & Borgida, 1995), view women as less competent (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), and sexually harass women (Yao et al., 2010). Thus, reducing the presence of these ads in both women's fashion and men's magazines should have benefits to the individual readers and to society more broadly.

However Festinger, (1954) research on the Social comparison theory reveals the physiological impacts this type of advertising is having on women and girls Festinger, (1954) has found when viewing images of models in advertising people are likely to

compare themselves to this images, which usually takes place in an upwards or downwards comparison. Yurtsever (2016) explains this comparison reflects the extent to which an individual feels they are meeting a certain societal ideal compared to the person they are viewing. In the case of advertising this is often in regards to beauty ideals. With the prevalence of one type of beauty being presented and the widespread use of Photoshop, the likelihood that the viewer will make an upwards comparison is high. These upward social comparisons have been found to lead to negative consequences in body image (Engeln-Maddox, 2005) and to a greater expressed likelihood of undergoing cosmetic procedures (Nabi, 2009). It is important to note that this result has been found with both men and women, but the prevalence of this type of advertising that includes idealised images of women, compared to men means social comparison theory is much more likely to impact women. Fredrickson & Roberts, (1997) further explore this in their self-objectification theory, which considers the pervasive sexualisation of women within Western societies, proposing that it leads to women adopting this external view of the self and ultimately to self-objectification, linking back to the aforementioned concept of the gaze. The unattainable standards shown to women create discrepancies between people's current appearance and financial status and the media-prescribed ideals, which in turn can cause dissatisfaction, leading people to engage in a range of maladaptive behaviors.

Lastly, the impact sexualized /objectified images has on women and girls is outlined by the association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007) report that found sexualisation is associated with the development of eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, and negative feelings regarding sexuality. Further, the fusion of women's sexuality and victimisation within print advertisements has been found to normalise violence against women, as both men and women are socialised in a climate that associates a women's distress or objection with sexuality. Numerous studies have shown this environment is associated with a poor understanding of consent and is associated with the dehumanising of women by young boys and men.

Culture is the shared, learned behavior within social groups that shapes social norms and behaviour. This report has demonstrated how advertisements draw on cultural norms to influence its audience, often serving to reinforce harmful and negative stereotypes. An advert saturated environment is particularly damaging for women and girls as advertisements draw heavily on sexuilised images of women as a means of selling their product, in the process often objectifying women. This representation of women within advertising often plays into deeply held misogynistic attitudes, notably in the male gaze where images of women are constructed from a male view; this process is again seen in the prevalence of white faces in advertising, reinforcing colonial conceptions of beauty based in white supremacy. Lastly, this report examined how taboo subjects are dealt with, highlighting the role advertising has in shaping public discourse on these issues that may determine how women view themselves and feel about their own bodies. Advertisements serve to inform us of what is normal and desirable; current mainstream representations of women in adverts too often reinforce misogynistic, racist and degrading images of women. This environment should not be normal and certainly shouldn't be seen as desirable. Advertising content is created to

appeal to us the consumer; therefore, we have the power to push back on these images through boycotting products that use harmful depictions of women, raising awareness, and writing to the companies demanding change, to help create a safer culture for all women.

<u>Reference list</u>

Ashikali, E-M and Helga Dittmar, H. (2015), The Impact of Cosmetic Surgery Advertising on Women's Body Image and Attitudes Towards Cosmetic Surgery Psychology of Popular Media Culture, American Psychological Association, 6 (3), 255–273.

Conley, T and Ramsey, L. (2011). Killing Us Softly? Investigating Portrayals of Women and Men in Contemporary Magazine Advertisements. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 35(3) 469-478.

Johnston-Robledo, I & Chrisler, J. (2011). The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma. Sex Roles, 68,9–18.

Waal Malefyt, T & McCabe, M. (2016). Women's bodies, menstruation and marketing "protection:" interpreting a paradox of gendered discourses in consumer practices and advertising campaigns. Consumption Markets & Culture, (19) 6, 555-575.

Ross, S, Ridinger, L and Cuneen, J. (2009). Drivers to divas: advertising images of women in motorsport. International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship. (10) 3, 7-17.

Stankiewicz, J and Rosselli, F. (2008). Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertisements. Sex Roles, 58, 579–589.

Erchull, M. (2013). Distancing Through Objectification? Depictions of Women's Bodies in Menstrual Product Advertisements. Sex Roles, 68, 32–40.

Martínez, E., Nicolás, A and Salas, A. (2012). Gender Representation in Advertising of Toys in the Christmas Period. Comunicar, (41). 21, 187-194.

Darwin, H. (2017) The pariah femininity hierarchy: comparing white women's body hair and fat stigmas in the United States, Gender, Place & Culture, 24 (1), 135-146.

Convincing Women in China They're Too Hairy. (2012, October 22). Bloomberg BusinessWeek, 11, (2), 3-4.

Yurtsever, M., K,. (2016). Advertisement watching preferences of children aged 3-6, Eurasian Journal of Educational Research, 65, 165-180.

Agnew, S and Sandretto, S. (2015). A case for critical literacy analysis of the advertising texts of menstruation: responding to missed opportunities. Gender and Education, (28), 4, 510–526.

Bakir, A and Palan, K. (2010). How are Children's Attitudes Toward Ads and Brands Affected by Gender-Related Content in Advertising?, Journal of Advertising, (39), 1, 35–48.

Burcar, L. (2010). Imploding the Racialized and Patriarchal Beauty Myth Through the Critical Lens of Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye. Imploding the Racialized and Patriarchal Beauty Myth, .9.139-158.

Merskin, Debra, (1999). Adolescence, Advertising, and the Ideology of Menstruation. Sex Roles, (40), 11, 204-212