

Sex and Violence in Advertising:

How Commodifying and Sexualizing Women Leads to Gender Violence

Shana Meganck

VCU

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In the United States, we recognize a commodity as something that is in demand; as a product that is desired; as a good that is mass-produced and can often times be purchased. This understanding of a commodity does not seem to raise any sort of ethical or moral issues at first glance; however, when we realize that our broad definition surprisingly includes the human body – due to the fact we live in a time where pornography and advertising are far too prevalent – I believe we are forced to question not only our understanding of the concept, but more importantly the role this commodification of the human body plays in reiterating gender stereotypes and gender inequality.

According to Robert Goldman (1987), a ‘commodity sign’ designates the joining together of a named material entity (a good, product or service) as signifier with a meaningful image as signified. The entire purpose behind creating these associations is selling commodities. “Contemporary ‘advertising teaches us to consume, not the product, but its sign. What it stands for is more important than what it is’” (694). Therefore, when women in America are commodified constantly in the images that advertising present, then even readers who share tacit social knowledge about how ads work, may produce disparate interpretations of what is meant.

There are a number of researchers that have looked at the role portrayals and representations of women created in our society, primarily in advertising, that have led to the commodification of women.

Jan Kurtz (1997), for example, states that when females appear in ads alone, the stereotype of the female as domestic provider who does not make significant decisions, is dependent on men, and is essentially a sex object, is often exemplified. Representations of women in advertising, over the years, have tended to highlight beauty (within narrow conventions), size/physique (again, within narrow conventions), sexuality (as expressed by the above), emotional (as opposed to intellectual) dealings, and relationships (as opposed to independence/freedom). Women are often represented as being part of a context (family, friends, colleagues) and working/thinking as part of a team. In drama, they tend to take the role of helper or object, passive rather than active. Often their passivity extends to victimhood (Kurtz, 1997).

Additionally, Susan Douglas (1984) wrote in *Where The Girls Are*, "American women today are a bundle of contradictions because the media imagery we grew up with was itself filled with mixed messages about what women should and should not do, what women could and could not do" (9). Douglas argued that the media's most striking contribution to the women and girls of America is the erosion of any sort of unified self. "In a variety of ways the mass media helped make us the cultural schizophrenics we are today, women who rebel against yet submit to prevailing images about what a desirable, worthwhile woman should be...the mass media has engendered in many women a kind of cultural identity crisis...We are ambivalent toward femininity on the one hand and...feminism in the other" (Douglas, 8). Women are a myriad of personalities, and they take on a multitude of roles. This becomes an inner strife that has been induced by the media, and according to Douglas these contradictions within women reflect our culture's indeterminate attitudes concerning the female gender.

According to Jean Kilbourne (1999), “Most of us know by now that advertising often turns people into objects. Women’s bodies, and men’s bodies too these days, are dismembered, packaged, and used to sell everything from chain saws to chewing gum. But many people do not fully realize that there are terrible consequences when people become things. Self-image is deeply affected. The self-esteem of girls plummets as they reach adolescence partly because they cannot possibly escape the message that their bodies are objects, and imperfect objects at that” (26-27). Kilbourne points out the dominating image of the painfully thin and flawlessly beautiful woman in advertising remains the ideal for American women. The bottom line is, to a great extent, the media tells men and women who they are and who they should be. And, if the cumulative effect of some of these messages, for example, is to degrade or objectify women, surely that is not the intent of the all the creators – it is simply an unfortunate side effect (Kilbourne, 1999).

Advertisers create images that dictate cultural trends indicative of the time. In the ongoing disruption of gender roles, this leads to a cultural uprising against women's increasing power. The uprising is noticeable in advertising.

Specifically looking at this idea of objectifying women in relation to power, Naomi Wolf (1991) argues that all the images around us tend to make women devalue themselves, thus keeping their status lower. Wolf states, “There is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women...The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” (13). In other words, the beauty

myth is about maintaining patriarchy. This idea is an extension of *The Feminine Mystique*, in which Betty Friedan (1963) hypothesized that women were victims of a false belief system that required them to find identity and meaning in their lives through their husbands and children. She believed that such a system caused women to completely lose their identity in that of their family. According to Friedan, women were encouraged to confine themselves to the narrow roles of housewife and mother, forsaking education and career aspirations in the process. Numerous factors caused the problem that Friedan wrote about, including the media, especially women's magazines, which emphasized the importance of being a housewife and made it seem like the only option. Run by men, these magazines created the image of the idealized housewife that every young woman strove to become.

Both Kilbourne and Wolf argued that women were damaged by the pressure to conform to an idealized concept of femininity. On the other hand, Jackson Katz (2003) stated that representations of men in advertising consistently featured violent white male icons, such as uniformed football players, big-fisted boxers, and leather-clad bikers. Sports magazines aimed at men, and televised sporting events, carried millions of dollars of military ads. Additionally, there were constantly ads for products designed to help men develop muscular physiques, such as supplements and weight training machines (Katz, 2003).

These hegemonic constructions of masculinity that are emphasized in mainstream advertising directly lead to males' increased belief that they should be strong, ambitious, sex-oriented and competitive, as well as normalize negative hegemonic qualities, such as violence. And, although these qualities portrayed in advertising are not

necessarily intentionally created to degrade women, increase eating disorders or sexualize violence, it's unfortunately a side effect, according to a number of researchers.

One of the first and most important assumptions of the study of mass communication has been the presumption that media and their content have significant and substantial effects. This presumption of media effects is easy to understand. It makes common sense that anything that consumes so much money and time must have some impact on our lives. It has been proven that the portrayals created in vehicles, such as advertising and pornography, directly lead to unhappiness with our bodies (Kilbourne, 1999; Wolf, 2002), uncertainty surrounding our roles (Friedan, 1963; Douglas, 1984) and possibly even gender violence.

Covell and Lanis (1995) stated that there has been a lot of research conducted on gender role portrayals in advertisements; however, there has been comparatively little attention paid to the portrayal of sexuality in advertisements. Covell et al. worked to correct this discrepancy by examining the effects of advertisements in which women were presented in either a sexually provocative or a non-traditional manner, on sexual attitudes supportive of sexual aggression. The authors hypothesized that if advertisement portrayals of women influenced beliefs, then scores on the Sexual Attitude Survey would be higher following exposure to advertisements in which women were portrayed as sex objects compared to those showing women in progressive roles. The authors concluded that the findings supported the hypothesis, stating that "media portrayals of women can influence sexual attitudes and beliefs" (646). Males who saw ads where women were presented as sex objects were more likely to be more accepting of interpersonal violence than were males exposed to other types of advertisements.

Additionally, Malamuth and colleagues previously looked at the effects on sexual violence in the media in two different studies. Malamuth and Check (1981) conducted an experiment on the effects of exposure to films that portrayed sexual violence having positive consequences. The results indicated that exposure to films portraying violent sexuality increased males' acceptance of interpersonal violence against women. Malamuth and Briere (1986) presented a model hypothesizing indirect effects of media sexual violence against women. It suggested that various cultural factors, including the mass media, and individual variables interact and possibly led to antisocial behavior, including aggression. The authors hypothesis was based not only on the frequency of sexually aggressive portrayals in media, but also on their positivity and potential for increasing women's victimization. After a review of relevant data, the authors concluded that exposure to media sexual aggression may adversely affect some men's thought patterns, but not their sexual arousal patterns.

The argument here is that devaluing women and sex, as we have in advertising and pornography, is extremely unhealthy for a society that is unfortunately prone to gender inequality and sexual violence. It is not proven that ads or any other form of media directly cause violence; however, "turning a human being into a thing, an object, is almost always the first step towards justifying violence against that person. It is very difficult, perhaps impossible, to be violent to someone we think of as an equal, someone we have empathy with, but it is very easy to abuse a thing" (Kilbourne, 1999, 278).

And, to make matters worse, we have taken it a step further and sexualized violence. It is the link with violence that makes the objectification of women a much more serious issue than the objectification of men. There is no doubt that men are

portrayed as sex objects in advertising too; however, the most important difference between the objectification of a man and a woman is that there is no danger for most men. Whether in advertising's portrayal of men (versus women) or in real life, the man is almost always in control. He is powerful, not passive. He is not likely to be raped, harassed, or abused.

In conclusion, treating sex as a commodity, in conjunction with the system of gendered behaviors and expectations that constitute our ideals of masculinity and femininity, has produced a culture that eroticizes dominance and depersonalizes sexuality, leading to the devaluing of partners in relationships and the increase in viewing women as objects, making it easier to violate them. Through a review of the literature, it can be argued that the regular degradation of women and portrayal of sexualized violence in the media (with particular attention paid to advertising throughout this review of the literature) provides a backdrop for rationalizing gender violence within our society.

Annotated Bibliography

Commodity. (2010). In Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commodity>

Covell, K. & Lanis, K. (1995). "Images of Women in Advertisements: Effects on Attitudes Related to Sexual Aggression." *Sex Roles*, 32(9/10), 639-649.

In this experiment, the authors examined various portrayals of women in advertisements and their effects on sexual attitudes. Twenty-five advertisements in which women were depicted as sex objects and 25 in which women were in progressive roles were selected for the study. Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of each advertisement, including general appeal, which was used to determine if the different types of advertisements were different in their appeal. In the second part of the study, participants completed four scales of Burt's Sexual Attitude Survey, a measure of attitudes believed to be rape-supportive, and conducive to sexual aggression against women. The findings supported the hypothesis that media portrayals of women can influence sexual attitudes and beliefs. In other words, the authors concluded that while the product-oriented ads were more appealing, those featuring females showed that males exposed to the sex-object advertisements were significantly more accepting of rape-supportive attitudes.

Douglas, S. (1984). *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*. New York: Random House.

In *Where the Girls Are*, Douglas analyzed the effects of mass media on women of the 1950s, and more importantly on the teenage girls of the baby boom era. Douglas explained why women were torn in conflicting directions and were still struggling to identify themselves and their roles. She recounted and dissected the ambiguous messages imprinted on the feminine psyche via the media and maintained that feminism is a direct result of the realization that mass media is a deliberate and calculated aggression against women. She purported that while the media seemingly began to acknowledge the power of women, it also purposely set out to redefine women and the qualities by which they should define themselves. The contradictory messages received by women leave women not only in a love/hate relationship with the media, but also in a love/hate relationship with themselves.

Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

In this book, Friedan defines women's unhappiness as "the problem that has no name," then she launched into a detailed exploration of what she believed caused this problem. Through her research – which included many theories, statistics, and first-person accounts – Friedan pinned the blame on an idealized image of femininity that she called the "feminine mystique." After studying decades of women's magazines, she concluded that men were in control of these publications and the editorial content of them forced women into the narrowly defined role of women as housewife. The core of her argument was that women's problem were one of identity and that education was the only thing that

had saved and could continue to save American women from the great dangers of the feminine mystique because women could only find their identity in work that used all of their capabilities.

Goldman, R. (1987). "Marketing Fragrances: Advertising and the Production of Commodity Signs." *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4(3), 691-725.

This essay addresses the questions of how commodity signs are produced and how, in the process of production, commodification becomes equivalent with value. Goldman looked at these questions in the context of mass advertising and mass marketing of fragrances because advertisements create structures of meaning for a product and, in this process, ads are also the means by assembling commodity signs. The advertising format analyzed in the essay includes four main features: a photographic or graphic signifying image, a boxed insert containing the image of a named product, framing copy and graphic framing devices. Goldman concluded that ads provide a structure that is capable of transforming the language of objects to that of people and vice versa.

Katz, J. (2003). "Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity: From Eminem to Clinique for Men." *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader* (349-352). Dines, G. & McMahon Humez, J. (Eds.), Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

This article points to the controversy between violence and media, while arguing that the most important aspect of this debate is gender. Katz stated the ways that hegemonic constructions of masculinity in mainstream magazines, advertisements and other media lead to the normalization of male violence. Ultimately, Katz believed that the reason that a majority of the crimes committed are by males is due to the masculinity emphasized in our society. He further examined the nature and effects of ads in regards to violence and masculinity and concluded that we need to develop a better approach to understanding cultural constructions of masculinity and their effects on our society.

Kilbourne, Jean (1999). *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel*. New York: Touchstone.

In *Can't Buy My Love*, Kilbourne discusses the power of the advertising industry and the role it plays on changing the way women (and men) think and feel about females in general and themselves. She specifically focused her analysis on the ubiquity of advertising and the objectification of females within this ever-present mass medium. The message of the book is that whether or not we admit it, we are each profoundly influenced by advertising, and children are growing up in a toxic cultural environment. She discussed how advertising has the power to effect our relationships (with both ourselves and others), the perception of our bodies, and create a link between such things as violence, rebellion and addiction.

Kilbourne, J. (1999). Killing Us Softly 3. Retrieved from www.video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-1993368502337678412#

“Killing Us Softly” is a video series about the power of advertising and its effects on women throughout history, as well as the current time period when the video was created (1999). Kilbourne looks at various advertisements and discusses issues such as beauty and gender assumptions that are perpetuated through the messages advertisers send women.

Kurtz, J. (1997). “Dream girls: women in advertising - advertising history.”
USA Today. n. pag.

“Dream girls” looks at women in advertising from a historical perspective. The article discusses the various “roles” women have played in advertising, and argues that these portrayals created by advertising have “unintentionally served as a recorder of the century’s cultural revolution in the external and internal lives of women.” Kurtz specifically states that advertising has shifted women’s image whenever there has been a need and has, therefore, created a number of reoccurring themes for women in advertising throughout history, including: the superwoman (a multifaceted machine who nurtures and seduces without pause, the independent woman, the love tutor, the sex kitten (who transfers eroticism to the product) and the homemaker (who is queen of the domestic sphere).

Malamuth, N & Briere, J. (1986). “Sexual Violence in the Media: Indirect Effect on Aggression Against Women.” *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3), 75-92.

Malamuth and Briere present a model hypothesizing the indirect effects of various cultural factors, including the media, on sexual violence against women. The model is dependent on two streams of research: the connections between exposure to sexually violent media and the development of thought patterns that support violence against women, and the links between such patterns and various forms of antisocial behavior. The data reviewed suggested that exposure to media sexual aggression may adversely affect some men’s thought patterns, but not their sexual arousal patterns. Additionally, there is a link between thought patterns condoning sexual violence and sexually aggressive behavior.

Malamuth, N. & Check, J. (1981). “The Effects of Mass Media Exposure on Acceptance of Violence against Women: A Field Experiment.” *Journal of Research in Personality*, 15, 436-446.

An experiment was conducted to determine the effects of exposure to films that portray sexual violence as having positive consequences. The subjects were randomly assignment to view either violent-sexual or control feature-length films, and within a week following the viewing of the second movie, subjects were asked to fill out an “Attitudes Survey” focusing on sexual issues. The results indicated that exposure to films portraying violent sexuality increased male subjects’ acceptance of interpersonal violence against women, and a similar finding was found on acceptance of rape myths. For females, there were nonsignificant tendencies in the opposite direction on both scales.

Wolf, N. (2002). *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*.
New York: Harper.

In this book, Wolf examines beauty as a demand and as a judgment upon women, with specific emphasis on how the idea of beauty impacts the areas of employment, religion, sexuality, culture and eating disorders. It takes an interesting look at the manipulation of media, as well as its effect on females' self worth. Wolf showcases how our culture cultivates the stereotypes of women as sex objects and men as success objects, and how female liberation is dependent on female beauty because our culture judges women, and women judge themselves, against the standards created via advertising and other media, such as pornography.