

The Power of Advertising and Celebrities

The Perpetuation of Unrealistic Beauty Portrayals of Women

From a very early age mothers and fathers tell girls “beauty is only skin deep,” or “it’s all in the eyes of the beholder,” or “it’s what’s inside that counts.” So why is it that today three out of four women in America believe that they are overweight, when only one out of four actually are, and 10 million women in the United States have eating disorders?

Because of the representations of women in the media today, and primarily advertising, the ideals of female beauty are misrepresented and the use of celebrity endorsers further perpetuates the unrealistic model of female attractiveness in American society.

In our culture, the media surrounds men and women everyday and it continually perpetuates the ideal of female perfection that becomes so ingrained in the minds of young girls that it inevitably produces the dissatisfaction with their bodies that they feel as teenagers, young adults and women.

Advertising appears not only on radio and television, in magazines and online, but also surrounds people outside now, on billboards, on the sides of buildings, on buses and in bathroom stalls. Ads are on the videos people rent, the food people buy and clothes people wear. The average American consumer sees more than 3000 ads per day and spends more than three years of his/her life watching commercials.¹ Advertising messages are truly inside our intimate relationships, our homes, our hearts and our heads.

¹ Jean Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love* (New York: Touchstone, 2000) 12.

And, the worst part about it, as well as the reason advertising works best, is because every consumer believes that it does not work on them. Consumers know it is there, and because of this, they feel that they have the power to control its effects. Of course, they do not pay direct attention to all of the advertisements they are consumed with, but they are powerfully influenced, mostly on an unconscious level, by the experience of being immersed in an advertising culture. “Advertising is subliminal...Not in the sense of hidden message, per se, but on the level that we do not even realize what it is doing.”²

The subliminal effect of advertising may not seem like a problem to some, but when the main messages disseminated surround the basic idea that happiness comes from products, ethical lines can be easily crossed. Advertising uses this tactic to exploit consumers’ social anxieties and leads them to believe that products are transformative, and that they can make people happy and fill voids within their lives. Additionally, advertising “teaches people not only to objectify one another but also to feel that their most significant relationships are with products that they buy.”³ And, while these messages are often directed at men, they are not only much more prevalent in advertising to women, but also more powerful.

Advertising is nothing less than toxic for woman. It teaches them lessons from the time they are little, such as girls are less valuable than boys, girls are sex objects and must be beautiful and that women are completely responsible for the success and failure of their relationships with men. Ads tells women that products can deliver what, in fact, they can only get through healthy interpersonal relationships: zest and vitality, empowerment to

² Kilbourne 59.

³ Kilbourne 27.

act, knowledge and clarity of self and others, sense of self-worth, desire for more connection.⁴

It is not a single ad that creates the problem; individually, the ads might even be funny. It is the culmination and the degree to which women are portrayed in outlandish ways, as well as the constant promises the ads make that become the issue.

For women, advertising has always promoted the core belief of American culture: that people can re-create themselves, transform themselves and transcend circumstances. However, today the message is that these things can be done instantly and effortlessly – by having a makeover, losing weight, having tighter abs, buying the right products or getting surgery. The products advertised can make women more beautiful, skinnier, happier and more lovable. Consequently, it is the possibility that such a transition is possible that encourages women to keep dieting, to buy more stuff and to read fashion magazines. What woman would not want to buy a new skin lotion or pair of jeans that could make them one step closer to ideal? This is something that advertisers both know and utilize. And, ultimately it is what makes advertising to women so dangerous. As noted by Jean Kilbourne, “the problem with advertising isn’t that it creates artificial longings and needs, but that it exploits our very real and human desires”.⁵ Advertising promises women the one thing they truly want: that it will help them look the way they “should.” The concern is, this is a false promise because the “ideal” is both unrealistic and unhealthy.

⁴ Kilbourne 90-92.

⁵ Kilbourne 77.

Females are told by advertising that they must be flawlessly beautiful and thin. Even worse, they get the message that with enough effort this is possible. Thus, many young girls and women spend enormous amounts of time trying to attain something that is not only trivial, but also completely unattainable. The “good girl” today is the thin girl, the one who keeps her appetite for food (and power, sex and equality) under control. In the old days, bad girls got pregnant; nowadays they get fat – and are more scorned, shamed and despised than ever before. This does nothing more than perpetuate the obsession with thinness and perfection that has overtaken women in society today, and has created devastating consequences for many women and girls, primarily in relation to self-esteem and physical health.

In Elizabeth Arveda Kissling’s article “I Don’t Have a Great Body, But I Play One on TV,” she covers the topic of self-esteem and beauty. Discussing self-help books and videos, she states that they are anti-feminist and concludes that they have a passive acceptance of sexist standards for appearance.⁶ Most of these books, for example, urge women to trade on their looks. This advice stems directly from the idea that one should conform to prevailing attitudes about the importance of looks in defining women’s roles – an idea that is largely developed from media, such as the self-help books referenced by Kissling and advertising. “As many feminists contend, in a patriarchal society where women are judged and valued first for their appearance, women often feel they have little choice but to be concerned with and continually working on their looks.” Additionally, “attractiveness is now not only a criterion by which men evaluate women, but is a

⁶ Elizabeth Kissling, “I Don’t Have A Great Body, But I Play One On TV,” *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 551-556

defining criterion of self-worth for women themselves.”⁷ The relationship between self-esteem and looks – especially slenderness – induces self-hatred in women because they cannot live up to the ideals portrayed in the media and, therefore, admired in America.

The meaning the media place on the thin ideal body image may be responsible for the body size overestimations that women make, and indirectly cause increases in anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Philip Myers and Frank Biocca’s study “Elastic Body Image: The Effect of Television Advertising and Programming on Body Image Distortions in Young Women,” supports the notion of an elastic body image in which actual body size is in conflict with a mediated ideal body image and an unstable self-perceived body image. Results of the study show that even 30 minutes’ worth of TV programming and advertising can alter a woman’s perception of the shape of her body.⁸ In other words, the study attempts to show that a woman’s perception of her body is a psychological construct and that her body image is elastic and can fluctuate in response to media content that focuses on the “ideal body shape.”

According to the Association of Model Agents (AMA), the ideal model is around 34-24-34 inches and at least 5 feet 8 inches tall. The ideal measurements used to be 35.5-23.5-35.5 inches, which were the alleged measurements of Marilyn Monroe.⁹

⁷ Kissling 554.

⁸ Frank Biocca and Philip Myers, “The Elastic Body Image,” *Journal of Advertising*, 1999, 21 October 2009

⁹ “Getting Started as a Model,” Association of Model Agents, 2009, 22 November 2009
<http://www.associationofmodelagents.org/>

“There are 3 billion women who don’t look like supermodels and only eight that do. As a result, more than half the adult women in the United States are currently dieting, and over three-fourths of normal weight American women think they are ‘too fat.’”¹⁰

At least one in five women in America suffer from an eating disorder today and eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses, at approximately 18 percent. Additionally, 80 percent of women are dissatisfied with their appearance.¹¹

Clearly, they are more than disorders at this point, and are more accurately a common way in which women cope with the difficulties in life and with the cultural contradictions involving food, eating and beauty.

Where else could images that perpetuate this type of problem come from if not from the images that surround women, telling them that they need to be unnaturally thin and flawlessly beautiful?

Through the advertising messages surrounding our society, every woman is somehow made to feel an intensely private shame for her “personal failure” of not having the perfect body image. Women feel alone, and like they are in a crowd “pushing toward the cosmetics counter, the plastic surgeon, the beauty specialist.”¹²

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.¹³

¹⁰ Jean Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love* (New York: Touchstone, 2000) 125

¹¹ “Eating Disorder Facts,” *Eating Recovery Center*, 2009, 22 November 2009
<https://www.eatingrecoverycenter.com/eating-disorder-facts.php>

¹² Wendy Chapkis, *Beauty Secrets* (Boston: South End Press, 1986) 5

¹³ Jean Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love* (New York: Touchstone, 2000) 18-27

And, despite the fact that each girl and woman knows her own belabored transformation from female to feminine is artificial, she harbors the secret conviction that it should be effortless. “A ‘real woman’ would be naturally feminine... To the uninitiated – men – the image must maintain its mystery, hence the tools of transformation are to be hidden away as carefully as the “flaws” they are used to remedy.”¹⁴

Therefore, however much the particulars of the beauty package have changed from one decade to the next, the basic principle has remained the same: maintaining a beautiful body is a woman’s responsibility and authority, and she will be judged on how close she comes to the ideal. Whatever the ideal is, it will always be narrow and hard to attain, but it will be the woman’s task to conform to it.

As noted by Kathy Davis in “Beauty and the Female Body,” although the standards of feminine beauty have shifted as the twentieth century progressed, the basic premise has remained the same. “In the U.S., for example, the stately Gibson girl with her hourglass figure made way for the perky, flat-chested flapper of the twenties. The businesslike, assertive beauties of the forties were replaced by the sex symbols and Playboy bunnies of the fifties. Thin was in, in the sixties and muscles and the healthy look were added in the late seventies as the fitness craze emerged. Despite all of these changes, one thing remained constant – that beauty was worth spending money, time and pain.”¹⁵

Advertisers know how strongly the messages they send influence women and that is why, above all else, what advertising sells is an image – whether it’s the image that thin is in,

¹⁴ Chapkis 5-6.

¹⁵ Kathy Davis, “Beauty and the Female Body,” *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 558

flawless skin is easy, or long hair is sexier than short. The bottom line is, advertising sells more than products, it sells attitudes, values and concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and perhaps, most important, normalcy. To a great extent it tells women who they are and who they should be. And the dilemma is, the normalcy that ads create is not normal at all. But, advertisers generally don't care about that. If the cumulative effect of some advertising, for example, is to degrade women or to sexualize children or to increase eating disorders, surely that is not the intent of the advertisers – it is simply an unfortunate side effect.¹⁶

Most brands in a given category are essentially the same, so advertisers have to sell the “image” that they want to portray and create artificial needs in order to sell unnecessary products. One powerful way that advertising sells this “image” is through the use of celebrity endorsers.

Celebrity, as defined by Hamish Pringle in *Celebrity Sells*, is “anyone who is familiar enough to the people a brand wishes to communicate with to add values to that communication by association with their image and reputation.”¹⁷

In the case of this definition then, already established celebrities line up to be in ads and people who simply appear in ads become celebrities. Today, little girls rate the supermodels that surround them high on their list of heroes, and most people know them

¹⁶ Jean Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love* (New York: Touchstone, 2000) 28

¹⁷ Hamish Pringle, *Celebrity Sells* (England: Wiley, 2004) xxiv

by first name. These women are heroes to young girls, not because of their character, courage or good deeds, but because of their flawless skin and beautiful features.¹⁸

Additionally, associating a product with Cindy, Sally or Kate gives it magic power to some consumers. Consumers are encouraged to not only buy more but to seek their identity with these “celebrities” and fulfillment through products. Of course one does not really have a relationship with the celebrities in advertisements, and the products are not magical, although some people want to believe they do.

In Jagdish Agrawal and Wagner Kamakura’s study, “The Economic Worth of Celebrity Endorsers: An Event Study Analysis,” results indicated that celebrity endorsement contracts are generally viewed as a worthwhile investment in advertising. According to the research, celebrities make advertisements believable and enhance message recall. Furthermore, celebrities aid in the recognition of brand names, create a positive attitude toward the brand, and create a distinct personality for the endorsed brand. Ultimately, celebrity endorsements are believed to generate a greater likelihood of customers’ choosing an endorsed brand.¹⁹

Celebrity endorsement acts as a signpost to quality and can significantly enhance the reputation of a brand. They are much more likely to be “invited in” by customers than other forms of advertising. Stars, by definition, have very high public awareness and people are able to visualize them very easily as they are so familiar with them. And, if the celebrities are carefully chosen to suit the brand they will provide the meaningful

¹⁸ Jean Kilbourne, *Can't Buy My Love* (New York: Touchstone, 2000) 60

¹⁹ Jagdish Agrawal and Wagner Kamakura, “The Economic Wroth of Celebrity Endorsers,” *The Journal of Marketing*, 1995, 21 October 2009

resonance and positive disposition which leads to “subscription” and the building of a successful relationship. There is a clear link between higher awareness, or “fame”, for a brand and more favorability towards it. Familiarity easily translates into favorability or likeability.²⁰

According to Grant McCracken in “Who Is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process,” celebrities’ effectiveness as endorsers stems from the cultural meanings with which they are endowed. Ultimately, meanings pass from celebrity to product and from product to consumer.²¹

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that up to 20 percent of all advertising employs celebrities and that all evidence reinforces that these campaigns are very effective in promoting the corporate, product and service brands with which they are aligned.²²

The public fascination with celebrities and the use of celebrities in advertising is not a new phenomenon. As discussed by Joshua Gamson in “The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America,” celebrity as a selling device has been evident in advertising nearly since the beginning, primarily through endorsements.²³ Later on, the confluence of cultural and economic forces shaping the relationship of film costume and popular fashion trends during Hollywood’s Golden Age is the story of studio marketing techniques exploiting consumer and social practices through the cultural embrace of film.

²⁰ Hamish Pringle, *Celebrity Sells* (England: Wiley, 2004) 68-70

²¹ Grant McCracken, “Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process,” *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 1989, 21 October 2009

²² Hamish Pringle, *Celebrity Sells* (England: Wiley, 2004) 10

²³ Joshua Gamson, “The Assembly Line of Greatness,” *Stardom and Celebrity* (London: SAGE, 2007) 151

Most notably, “cinema shops” in department stores, the increasing employment of film stars in advertisements for personal products, and the continued glamorization of stars and their lives through fan magazines and gossip in national presses kept Hollywood actresses and their apparel in full view, tempting consumers to emulate stars’ manufactured style.²⁴ Additionally, the advent of photography certainly gave an enormous boost to the influence of celebrities over other people and industries such as cosmetics, hair care and toiletries.²⁵

As stated by Richard Dyer, “Stars are made for profit. In terms of the market, stars are part of the way films are sold. The star’s presence in a film is a promise of a certain kind of thing that you would see if you want to see the film. Equally, stars sell newspapers and magazines, and are used to sell toiletries, fashions, cars and almost anything else.”²⁶

The ever-increasing association with stars and fashion provides fans with many things. First, great entertainment as they see beautiful people looking wonderful. Second, fans can identify particular looks and styles that might work for them. Third, when they see a new fashion in a shop fans can see the reference point back to the stars and the catwalks that validates what might otherwise be a scary departure from what they normally wear. Fourth, there is a welcome element of escapism and fantasy as consumers put on a style

²⁴ Rebecca Epstein, “Sharon Stone in a Gap Turtleneck,” *Stardom and Celebrity* (London: SAGE, 2007) 208

²⁵ Hamish Pringle, *Celebrity Sells* (England: Wiley, 2004) 39

²⁶ Richard Dyer, “Heavenly Bodies,” *Stardom and Celebrity* (London: SAGE, 2007) 86

made famous by a particular star and in so doing they join the fan club and identify with the celebrity's lifestyle.²⁷

Hence, over the years, with increased opportunities through photography, film and advertising to associate with and glimpse into the private lives of celebrities and learn what products they use, people are led more and more often to believe that they can get ever closer to their idols, and they are willing to spend considerable sums of money doing so.

Therefore, it is clear that celebrities affect people in many ways – On a broad level via the media (movies, TV, newspapers, radio and magazines) and how the media feeds off the cult of celebrity, and on a more personal level, celebrities influence how people, especially women, look, dress, and live.

Very large numbers of people use stars as role models and nowhere is this more evident than in the area of personal appearance. Much of human behavior, and specifically purchasing, can be attributed to the desire to improve presentation and desirability, and it is easy to see the way in which the hair, makeup and fashion industries operate in relation to the celebrities they constantly generate and which customers support through emulation and the purchasing this entails.²⁸ In other words, although a person may not be a celebrity or ever become one, the typical consumer may still aspire to identify with, look like and be like a celebrity by purchasing the product recommended by the celebrity.

²⁷ Hamish Pringle, *Celebrity Sells* (England: Wiley, 2004) 32-33

²⁸ Pringle 11.

The problem with this emulation is that the promise advertising continuously delivers – that people can re-create themselves and transform themselves instantly and effortlessly by buying the right products – is personified through the use of celebrity endorsers who do not represent the typical female consumer, but instead continue to help perpetuate the unrealistic and unhealthy ideals of female beauty in our society today by assuring that the endorsing celebrities have attained their nearly flawless perfection from the products they promote, leading female consumers to believe that it is so easily attainable when in actuality it is not only far more difficult (if not impossible), but also unnatural.