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Images of Women in Advertising

Images of women and femininity in advertisements have real ramifications on society. Stereotypical and offensive portrayals of women in ads negatively affect everyone—men, women, and children alike. Companies often capitalize on and exploit the oppression of women in order to market products. Women take the brunt of companies' stereotypical advertising in regards to weakened self-esteem, body image, and treatment from men.

Advertisements have become pervasive in culture. Advertising is present in television, music videos, movies, print sources, radio, billboards, store windows, online, and more. With the rise of the internet, online ads have increased to nearly inescapable amounts. Our culture is saturated in ads because marketing is essential in a capitalist society. According to an issues paper written by Women's Health Victoria, adults view over 360 ads per day in the United States ("Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women's Health and Wellbeing," 2018). It is important to examine the volume of ads being consumed by the general public because ads play a significant role in socialization and cultivating social norms. Marketers help to shape what people think is acceptable and normal in society. Marketers have the power to dictate the narrative that is told through ads shown in media like movies, television, the internet, etc. Gender stereotypes are often brought into the narrative marketers tell, and sell, because of the highly recognizable nature and low-level thinking that gender stereotypes require.

According to the documentary *The Codes of Gender*, gender is often denoted by language, appearance, clothing, colors, etc. (Vega, Killoy, Earp, & Jhally, 2009). Gender stereotypes are easily marketable because they are made to be universally relatable, and gender is a central theme in most advertisements for this reason. However, stereotypes are limiting and over-simplified versions of people. Marilyn Frye, philosopher and radical feminist, referred to this concept of indicating and marking sex through language, appearance, clothing, etc., as sex marking. Sex marking gives people the impression that gender is one of the most defining aspects of an individual (Frye, 1983). This becomes problematic when males and females are split into two opposite categories that are made to be unequal to one another.

Sex marking is how people communicate their own sex and identify and respond to the perceived sex of others (Frye, 1983). Sex marking inflates the differences between males and females. It is done through language, clothing, names, pronouns, jobs, body hair, colors, and more. Sex marking streamlines the process of separating the sexes, which is central in a patriarchal system that relies on the subordination and oppression of women (Frye, 1983). It is important to be able to identify and distinguish the sexes because it creates and maintains inequality (Frye, 1983). Frye believes that marking oneself as a female announces membership in a subordinate class (Frye, 1983). This means people can easily identify a woman from a man, and then treat and interact with her differently than with a male counterpart. In making one's sex obvious, people can understand how they are supposed to treat one another.

In addition, feminine sex marking is often self-diminishing and self-harming. Waxing and other forms of body hair removal as well as dieting are some forms of harmful feminine sex marking. High heels are another example of sex marking because they are primarily worn by women and serve the purpose of communicating one's femininity. Heels express femaleness, but

they are also uncomfortable, painful, and can cause serious damage to a woman's health.

Wearing high heels compromises one's balance, making women more vulnerable to falling and injury ("High Heels Can Be a Pain in the Neck (and Back)," (n.d.). Heels also contribute to joint pain and cause the Achilles tendon to shorten and tighten, producing muscle pain ("High Heels Can Be a Pain in the Neck (and Back)," (n.d.). Despite the negative effects of high heels on women's health, lots of women continue to wear them. One reason for this is because heels make the leg muscles more defined and elongated which is considered attractive for women. The social pressure to look attractive outweighs the physical pain. This form of sex marking is just one of many that puts women in painful situations for the external validation of being considered a "real woman."

Sex marking reinforces women's subordinate role in the patriarchal system. This is because after the process of undergoing all of the behaviors that are required to be considered female, females are in fact made into being a separate, unequal class (Frye, 1983). Differences and inequality between the sexes are deemed unnecessary to criticize because they appear to be natural. Companies capitalize on the pervasiveness, and seeming naturalness, of sex marking. Companies do this by replicating recognizable sex marking behaviors in advertisements. Frye is critical of sex marking because it creates and upholds inequality. However, ads continue to use this tactic of sex marking because patriarchal society still buys into the idea of two, distinct sexes.

Men and women are divided and alienated within the patriarchal system, and this is reflected in advertisements as well. Sexism in advertising can be understood through the lens of male privilege. Male privilege is fostered by male domination, male centeredness, and male identification. These three elements comprise a patriarchal system in which women make up the

oppressed group. Allan G. Johnson, author of *The Gender Knot*, describes oppression as “a social phenomenon that happens between different categories of people either within or between societies.” He expands on this idea further by stating, “It is a system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another” (Johnson, 2014). Men, in this case, benefit as a group from the servitude of women.

Male privilege is manifested in three main ways in a patriarchal society. The first is male domination. Male domination can be understood by analyzing how positions of power are primarily occupied by men. Men disproportionately hold positions of power and authority such as political office, senior positions in businesses, school and university administrators, religious and moral authorities, military generals, and the list goes on. Having mostly men in these influential positions contributes to the idea that men are there because they are more capable and deserving than women. Men are the ones in the dominant group, so they create and maintain power differences between men and women. There are few women that are high enough in leading positions to be able to voice the wants and needs of women as a group. Not only are women excluded and ignored in important spaces, but male domination also normalizes the suppression of women’s voices and presence. As it is customary for men to be the ones in charge, it comes across as abnormal and jarring when a woman rises in the ranks or exercises power and authority in relationships, conversations, and other cultural spaces. In general, male domination is the recurrence of men in positions of power while women are excluded.

The second element of a patriarchal society is male identification. Male identification means that society’s key values are associated with maleness and masculinity (Johnson, 2014). Men, and things associated with males, are considered normal, standard, generic, and universal. Additionally, things associated with masculinity are perceived to be superior to things associated

with femininity (Johnson, 2014). For example, bravery and independence are considered admirable characteristics. They are also considered to be masculine traits. Conversely, being emotional and passive are considered to be feminine qualities and are less highly valued in society. Language is another example of how male identification manifests in everyday life. The phrase, “hey guys,” is used to greet a group of people regardless of gender. It would be appropriate to direct this phrase at a group of all males, a group with both males and females, and even a group of all females. However, the same cannot be said about the phrase, “hey ladies.” “Hey ladies” is a greeting reserved strictly for a group of all females, and it would be considered an offensive insult to address a group of all males or a mixed-gendered group with the phrase. Male identification positions women as outsiders in society. Men and masculinity are the standard norm in addition to being considered better.

Lastly, the third main element present in a patriarchal society is male centeredness. Male centeredness is the notion that it is more important what men are doing and saying in public and private spaces than what women are doing and saying (Johnson, 2014). Men are the main focus in most movies, conversations, school classrooms, sports, history, relationships, families, etc. Women are cast in the shadows, and when women are the main focus, there is more emphasis on how a woman looks as opposed to what she is saying or doing. Society is more concerned with what males are doing because they are seen as more important and worthy of our attention. One example of this is in the sports world. According to Johnson, females make up 40% of all sports participation, but only 3-8% of sports media coverage is dedicated to women in sports. This has only increased by 3% in the past ten years (Johnson, 2014). Within a patriarchal society, male centeredness is inbred in everyone’s subconscious. Women are not valued based on their intellect or abilities, but rather on their sexual appeal and reproductive capacities.

Male domination, male identification, and male centeredness play key roles in everyday life, both on a personal level and on a systematic level. Male domination in relation to the advertisement industry means that marketing executives are mostly men. Therefore, decisions are made to benefit and appeal to men. Harping back to male identification, ads convey the male point of view. Furthermore, male centeredness is manifested in how ads portray men and women differently. Men are shown to be powerful, assertive, and action-oriented, while women are portrayed as objects to be looked at by men (Vega, Killoy, Earp, & Jhally, 2009). Displays of male privilege are rampant in advertisements, as well as work spaces, the home, on the news, in sports, and in the media. Awareness of patriarchal elements in society provides important context in order to analyze advertisements. Patriarchy functions on a systematic level and infiltrates personal life. Advertisements are one facet in which patriarchal ideals permeate into the personal and collective psyche. Ads hold up a mirror to patriarchal manifestations in society. They are a window into how people subconsciously view gender and gender roles.

Children are just as susceptible, if not more so, to the influence of advertising as adults are. Children are often naïve to marketing tactics and cannot readily distinguish advertising from reality. Given the naivety of children, advertisements directed at children often rely on implicit gender cues. The Women's Health Victoria found that color is one of the main ways that gender is communicated to children through advertisements ("Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women's Health and Wellbeing," 2018). The color pink indicates clothing and toys meant for girls while the color blue indicates clothing and toys meant for boys. At just two years old, children are able to distinguish which toys are meant for them based on their gender depending on if the toy is blue or pink ("Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women's Health and Wellbeing," 2018). The Women's Health Victoria

also noted a study that found 97% of pink toys listed in a toy catalogue were listed in the “girls only” section (“Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women’s Health and Wellbeing,” 2018). There is a literal separation between boys’ and girls’ toys, and color is used to signify this divide. The idea of Frye’s sex marking is relevant here in how color is being used to separate what is male and female. This separation is arbitrary, yet it is still made one more way in which, as Frye observes, sex and gender are constantly made relevant.

In addition to color, the function of the toy itself also makes a difference in whether or not it is marketed to girls or boys. Dolls, cosmetics, and domestic work-related toys (cooking, baking, and cleaning) are considered feminine and meant for young girls. Stereotypes associated with females such as an emphasis on physical attractiveness, being nurturing, and interpersonal relationships are also incorporated into girls’ toys. These toys are marketed to girls, while toys associated with male stereotypes are marketed to young boys. Boys’ toys include “fantasy roles such as the muscled, aggressive, action hero” (“Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women’s Health and Wellbeing,” 2018). Another study found that the majority of action-oriented toys, vehicles, weapons, and building toys sold by Disney were marked under the “boys only” section (“Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women’s Health and Wellbeing,” 2018). This reinforces the stereotype that boys and masculinity are linked to physicality, boldness, and violence. Toys instill and perpetuate gender stereotypes in young children’s minds. This has lasting influences on how children view themselves and their gender.

Ads target boys and girls differently. It has been shown that children often respond more negatively to the opposite gendered toy, particularly boys. In a study done by Laura K. Zimmermann, psychologist at Shenandoah University, she found that preschool boys had

negative evaluations of feminine toys presented in television commercials (Zimmermann, 2017). Boys and girls overall had more positive responses to ads targeted at their own gender, but girls were more inclined to have positive responses to the TV ads regardless of the targeted gender (Zimmermann, 2017). In contrast, boys were more negative overall to toy ads targeted to girls or both genders. This preference was shown to strengthen over time, meaning that older boys are even less likely to be receptive to feminine advertisements (Zimmermann, 2017). This study illustrates how boys are taught at a young age that anything associated with femininity is bad. By observing people and learning implicit and explicit lessons about gender, boys learn that females and femininity are inferior to maleness and masculinity. Maleness is prized in a male-dominated, male-centered, and male-identified society. Toy advertisements bolster all three of these elements in the minds of young children. Children are exposed and susceptible to the inequality that sex marking creates, and this is proven in the fact that even young boys look down upon “girl” toys.

One example of how girls and boys are marketed to differently is with LEGO and LEGO Friends. A video titled “LEGO Friends – LEGO & Gender Part 1,” posted by Feminist Frequency in 2012, details the gender stereotypes in LEGO toys. The LEGO brand contains the main product line which is primarily marketed to young boys. The company made an extension to their main product line with LEGO Friends. LEGO Friends is marketed primarily to young girls as signified by the purple and pink coloring, female characters, and feminine activities (Feminist Frequency, 2012). Some of the feminine activities made available in LEGO Friends include baking, shopping, and spending time with other female friends. These are all acceptable activities to be marketed to children; however, the problem arises in the fact that the “normal” activities included in the main product line of the LEGO brand, such as firefighting and

construction, are not available in the LEGO Friends product line. Similarly, the activities in LEGO Friends are not included in the main LEGO product line (Feminist Frequency, 2012). Boys and girls are separated into two, distinctly dissimilar groups and made to play with different toys and envision themselves in different roles based on their gender.

LEGO's two separate product lines do not provide equal opportunity play. It has been shown that LEGO toys help young children with spatial awareness, motor development, and building skills (Feminist Frequency, 2012). These are useful skills to develop at a young age because it can lead to a professional career in the highly profitable engineering field. Unfortunately, girls are deliberately left out of the marketing for LEGO toys, so only boys are given the opportunity to foster these skills in young child's play. The LEGO line marketed to girls, LEGO Friends, does not provide the same opportunities for building. It does offer skill development in terms of social skills, as the emphasis of the LEGO Friends line is friendship. However, this is not a fair trade and leads to gender differences in spatial, cognitive, and social development outcomes ("Advertising (In)Equality: The Impacts of Sexist Advertising on Women's Health and Wellbeing," 2018). The limited activities made available to girls in toys implies that girls do not have to worry about more important things and that they should be more invested in leisure and relaxation (Feminist Frequency, 2012). Activities such as baking and shopping do not build profitable skills or provide the same professional opportunities later in life that building and engineering do. Girls are given the short end of the stick when it comes to the real-life skills LEGO toys offer.

The LEGO brand reinforces the idea that it is more important what boys do whilst it is more important what girls look like, and this can be seen in the options provided in the LEGO product line and the LEGO Friends product line. In the main LEGO product line, the characters

are stocky and generic looking and are provided with action-oriented activities. Conversely, the LEGO Friends product line has characters that are taller, slimmer, and more feminine in appearance and clothing. The activities in the LEGO Friends product line are of less importance than the appearance of the characters. This ties into the patriarchal element of male-centeredness in the fact that society has a different lens for boys than it has for girls. People look at boys for what they are doing and capable of, whereas people look at girls to simply look at them.

The main LEGO product line was made for boys, and LEGO Friends came later as an afterthought in an attempt to include girls. Even though this expansion included girls, girls are not included equally. Girls are not provided with the same opportunities the boys are in terms of building and fantasy roles. The LEGO brand is participating in sex marking through their products and branding. Their marking of sex through color, appearance, and activities/roles of the characters creates and maintains inequality. The boys' and girls' toys are separate and unequal.

Advertisements directed at adults incorporate gender stereotypes as well. Hanna Andersson and Emilia Schytt, authors of the journal article "Sexism in Advertising," state that there are visual cues to look for when deconstructing sexist ads. These visual cues include expression, posture, and gesture (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). Male superiority and power are often displayed in size difference and positioning (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). Andersson and Schytt detailed ten categories of sexism portrayed in advertisements. These categories include relative size, the feminine touch (self-touching and fragile touch to the outside world), function ranking (male overpowering female), the ritualization of subordination (submissive body language in a sexual manner), licensed withdrawal (not being psychologically involved in the physical world and in need of protection), body display (revealing clothing), location (appearing

in a domestic environment), movement (limited or inhibited), and lastly, objectification (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). These ten categories comprise all the ways in which sexism is present in advertisements. All of these categories are specifically marked as feminine so as to not be confused with masculinity. Seeing women portrayed in these ways is an ordinary occurrence. However, to see a man in any of these positions would be alarming. The documentary *The Codes of Gender* explores how men and women are given a script for how to perform their gender. This script, or code, is then used by companies in order to sell their products. Ads communicate universally understood codes of gender such as female powerlessness, submission, and dependence (Vega, Killoy, Earp, & Jhally, 2009). The messages about gender that ads convey have overt meanings as well as subliminal meanings. These subliminal messages teach viewers just as much about gender as the overt messages do. Lessons learned in ads have real impacts on how consumers purchase products and think about the world around them, and this is why sexism in ads are so dangerous.

Companies habitually use sexualized images in order to grab viewers' attention, and the phrase "sex sells" is often used to justify objectifying images of women in ads. However, research shows that while sexual images do create a response in viewers, it does not lead them to purchasing products. Andersson and Schytt found that "sexist advertising influences consumer attitudes of a company negatively" (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). In addition to not increasing purchase rates and leading to more negative attitudes toward the company, Andersson and Schytt found that "sexist advertising most often use depictions which aid the creation of distorted body images, portraying unattainable standards" (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). In the study, females stated that "sexual suggestive images made them feel as if they also had to be and act as seductively, and look like the model in the ad" (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). This indicates that

ads have a real impact on how women view themselves. Women feel the pressure to act and look a certain way in response to advertisements. Women internalize the narratives told in advertisements of how women are supposed to be, and try to recreate this impossible standard. This has negative repercussions on women's self-esteem and body image. Ads that promote thinness have been found to increase the likelihood of "anorexia, depression, body dissatisfaction, and lowered self-esteem rather than inspiring young women" (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016). Professors at Manchester Metropolitan University, Dee Golstraw and Brendan James Keegan, found that women with body dissatisfaction are more vulnerable to social comparison and internalizing the media's depiction of the thin ideal (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016). Self-esteem and body image are closely intertwined, and women with a negative self-body image have lower self-esteem. The impossible ideals expected of women reflected in advertising have a real, and negative, impact on women that can result in destructive eating disorders and poor self-image.

In addition to the impact ads have on how women view themselves, ads also impact how men view women. According to Andersson and Schytt, "Researchers have suggested that there is a relationship between the depiction of women in advertising and the way women's roles in society are perceived" (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). Given that the depiction of women in advertising often relies on stereotypes and objectification, women's roles in society are perceived to be inferior and sexual by nature. Ads that show women in domestic settings, such as the kitchen, reinforce the belief that women belong there and should not venture outside in the public domain. Furthermore, ads that depict women in objectified and sexualized functions reinforce the belief that women's sole purpose is to exist for males' sexual pleasure. Research supports this, as "stereotypical advertising can increase stereotypical beliefs" (Andersson & Schytt, 2017). This

should implore marketers to make ethical ads that uplift and promote gender equality because ads impact people's perceptions of gender roles. It is also the responsibility of consumers to support companies that prioritize and promote gender equality.

While many mainstream ads fall back on stereotypical depictions of gender, there are ads that aim to challenge gender stereotypes. Ads that challenge gender stereotypes serve a very important role in society because ads have the power to shift societal norms. The term "femvertising" has been used to describe ads that intend to confront gender stereotypes (Abdallah, Jacobson, Liasse, & Lund, 2018). This term gained popularity in 2014 as companies started to confront gender stereotypes by incorporating female empowerment messages in their ad campaigns (Abdallah, Jacobson, Liasse, & Lund, 2018). Research has shown that femvertising is effective in driving sales, and "females who were exposed to female empowerment advertisements indicated significantly higher positive attitudes towards the ads and the brands that were making use of femvertising" (Abdallah, Jacobson, Liasse, & Lund, 2018). Moreover, 52% of women in a study done by SheKnow Media stated that they purchased a product because they approved of how the company represented women (SheKnows Living Editors, 2014). This evidence makes a strong case that equitable and empowering messages regarding gender and femininity are to the benefit of the consumer and the company. Positive portrayals of femininity are necessary in order to shift negative notions of femininity into a more constructive, equitable light.

Changing the look and messages in advertisements will not flip the patriarchy on its head completely, but it is a start. The patriarchy is a deep-seated system that affects every aspect of society, so it will take a radical societal change for the patriarchal system to be fully shattered.

However, ads do have a profound impact on consumers and society as a whole. Shifting the messaging in ads to be more equal and female-empowering will be a step toward progress.

In a patriarchal society, women are oppressed. The reality of sex marking, male domination, male identification, and male centeredness create and uphold gender inequality. Advertisements reinforce all of these things because ads portray stereotypical attitudes which are broadcasted for all of society to interpret and replicate. This is how a cycle of systematic oppression of women is replicated time after time. People are not born believing gender stereotypes, but rather they are taught them. Ads are one of the most common and persuasive ways gender stereotypes are learned. Children and adults are exposed to stereotypical representations of gender which can lead to damaging attitudes about the assumed differences between men and women. As it has been shown that stereotypical ads increase stereotypical beliefs, it is important for marketers to be conscious of their impact when creating clichéd and stereotypical ads. Women are disproportionately harmed by these stereotypical ads because characteristics associated with females, more often than not, carry unfavorable connotations. This has negative consequences on women's self-esteem, body image, and how others, namely men, view and treat women. Advertisements have an overwhelming impact on individuals and society as a whole, so it is for the betterment of everyone that ads portray an equitable and empowering image of women.

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