

Independent Project LHS34

Assessment 4 - Exegesis

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**Research question:**

**How can advertisers appropriately and honestly portray women in a fashion PR campaign?**

Conventional wisdom has long maintained that sex sells in advertising. Advertisers often sexualise content under the guise that audiences enjoy the imagery and therefore, the tactic is an effective way to promote a brand and increase sales.

Driven largely by this assumption women have become the focus of product-driven campaigns, their sexuality and physical appearance exploited to manipulate audience emotions for the purpose of selling products. The aforementioned assumption is proven by the following research; the evidence finding that women in fact, do not enjoy objectified imagery.

It is the objective of this exegesis to discuss how sexually based images of women create more damage than success in terms of audience engagement. As women maintain their fight for equality and appropriated representation in the media, we will also present how Ocean Eyes Swim's, '*Real, Raw & Devine*' campaign works to assist by providing a platform where women are depicted in more honest and organic ways.

The term '*objectification*' throughout this exegesis will refer to hyper-sexualised and provocative imagery, depictions of women portrayed as vulnerable, incapacitated, presented as sexual objects or any other examples that demonstrate a clear female subordination within the consumer-based media sphere.

Here I will delve into concepts regarding cultural and social framing of the gender stereotypes that normalise objectification and observe how this stems from deeply ingrained social norms within Western culture.

This exegesis will explain the purpose behind the Ocean Eyes Swim '*Real, Raw & Divine*' campaign and how it acts to demonstrate that it is possible to gain genuine brand traction and

success in women's fashion; even where there is visible female skin. And how it is achievable without exploiting or creating female vulnerabilities.

I have done this by building a campaign that is inclusive to body type and appearance and embodies a welcoming and diverse brand culture, recognises women's emotional needs as consumers and celebrates the individuality and presence of all women.

Lastly, this work will examine the concepts of past female objectification in application to public relations campaigns and advertising and explain how and why the latest campaign for Ocean Eyes Swim was designed to oppose all the theories and issues discussed here.

## **THE PROBLEM**

Understanding and recognising how the objectification of women within the media sphere is a fundamental aspect to Ocean Eyes Swim's, *'Real, Raw & Devine'* campaign because we must be able to fully comprehend the problem before we can collectively make attempts to rectify it.

The objectification of women in advertising and media has been a topic of debate for decades as observed by the date range of references within this exegesis and while there are notable efforts by some brands and regulatory authorities being made to rectify it, the issue remains.

One example I present occurred as recently as February 2022. Online fashion company, *Boohoo* released an advertisement for a t-shirt that depicted a model wearing it, thong-style bikini bottoms and sneakers. It was not the clothing that landed the company under scrutiny but rather, the sexually suggestive posing and out of context display in which it was presented.

*Boohoo*, who have come under fire for this kind of advertising before attempted to argue that the t-shirt was part of their swimwear range, however the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) noted that the partial nudity, sexually suggestive poses, or bikini bottoms were not relevant to the product and did not depict how a t-shirt would typically be worn (2022).

They concluded that the ad was hyper sexualising young women and banned it, forcing the brand to remove it from their platforms. They issued *Boohoo* with a warning that they need to be, *"better prepared with a sense of responsibility to consumers and to society so that they do not cause serious or widespread harm by objectifying women"* (BBC, 2022).

Mulvey (1975) said, "*analysing beauty or pleasure, destroys it*" Our society needs these unattainable standards of perceived beauty to be destroyed to be able to collectively evolve beyond them and that is precisely what my PR campaign aims to do. For too long objectification has been accepted and ignored so it is the intent of this research to bring it under the microscope and analyse it to the point of hopeful destruction.

While Mulvey's research is dated, it is referenced within this exegesis as a demonstration of the length of time female objectification has been a notable problem.

While the issue of objectification has been long standing, the rise of social networking sites has amplified advertising tactics and allowed it to become a constant state of daily human life. Previously, one was better apt to close the magazine or turn the TV off to avoid the exposure to hyper sexualised and retouched imagery. Today, smartphones are feeding women a constant stream of manipulative advertising that tells them they need buy and exercise machine to lose weight, skincare to stop those pesky wrinkles or a box dye to hide those accumulating grey hairs (Klein 2013, p. 7).

As a 30-something woman myself, I can confirm that it is constant and it does feel inescapable.

The models used in traditional media advertisements of the past appear to be 'perfect' which suggests to female audiences, that to find social acceptance, she must continuously be in a state of image improvement. With the 24/7 accessibility of social sharing sites, that concept has intensified (Klein 2013, p.8). Now, it's not just nameless models on the television; women are receiving digests of the same type of content to their devices from their friends, classmates, neighbours. It's much closer to home than it's ever been.

As I set out to produce a social, shareable PR campaign for Ocean Eyes Swim that depicts women as an individual and presence rather than a body, it is imperative that my campaign embodied key messages that do not further effect the quality of life of women in my audience.

Those key messages are:

- All bodies are bikini bodies - body image is not the key focus of the campaign but it is a necessary factor given the number of women that won't wear swimwear because they think they must first look a certain way (Frederick et al, 2006, p. 415).

- No airbrushing or digital alterations of any kind has ever been utilised within campaign imagery. Ocean Eyes Swim will not contribute to advertising that overrides a woman's perception of reality or provides her with false expectation.
- Inclusive model representation – race, age, and body type inclusions so there is greater opportunity for women to identify with someone from the campaign imagery.
- A focus on women's presence rather than focusing on her physical attributes; Ocean Eyes Swim is not here to objectify her in any way.

It can be easy to assume one is free from persuasion when it comes to advertising. Everyone has varied levels of illusion that they are exempt from the influence of advertising; and women are comparatively easy targets (Hogg 2003, p.161). \$8.47 billion was spent on cosmetics in Australia in 2022, \$1 billion of that was on cosmetic treatments such as Botox, hair extensions or acrylic nails and the market is expected to grow annually by 3.52% (Statista 2022).

Additionally, the average person in Australia is exposed to between 4 and 10 thousand ads every day but the brain filters these out to avoid information overload (Bloomtools 2022). Advertising is effective because it categorises people and motivates them to buy products but the darker side of that is the damage caused to women who are expected to live up to the standards of beauty being sold to them. This issue is a long-standing public health problem and one that the consumer market is profiting from (Jhally & Kilbourne 2010).

The recurring messages within these campaigns imply that every part of a woman's body should be altered and changed to gain social acceptance; it is profitable when women feel bad about themselves and they buy to replicate the artificial looks being sold to them; their faces become masks and bodies becoming objects.

In addition to external objectification, women are learning to objectify themselves and experiencing severe guilt and inadequacy if they cannot measure up to the imagery they consume (Jhally & Kilbourne 2010). The greater negative effect on women here is the female perception that one's physical beauty and sexuality to be a measure for self-worth.

Psychologists say that women can begin to internalise external objectification of their bodies resulting in self-criticism and compulsive monitoring of their appearance (Sen 2019).

Finally, it is these insecurities fostered by women at the hand of advertisers that has made women believe that they are not enough as they are or that they feel the need to lose a few kilos to wear a swimsuit (Napoli et al, 2003).

This is of great relevance to the Ocean Eyes Swim campaign as it depicts women in their true forms. They were asked to present themselves to their photoshoot a way that best represents who they are, they were not made up with styling or make up to reflect a brand's aesthetic as traditional in advertising. They were then placed in swimwear they chose and felt comfortable in which, as a brand, is a non-negotiable; providing styles and cuts that are enjoyed by the audience. Ocean Eyes Swim nods at seasonal trends but is more focused on customer demand.

Scholars have also noted that the sexist language used in these campaigns, not just imagery, reinforces the superiority of men, keeps women subordinated under the male gaze and perpetuates male privilege in Western society (Parks 2004, p.7).

In theory, the male gaze is the act of depicting women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents them as sexual objects for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer (Mulvey, 1975).

It could be argued that the deeper issue does not stem from malice but rather from societal messaging to males on the other end of the influential spectrum. From an early age, boys are exposed to unrealistic and hypersexualised images of women. Alongside this, glorified masculinity and dominance in the media also has a deep impact on shaping a child's mind, as they learn to normalise compacting emotions that could be deemed as too sensitive and to de-humanise women (Sen, 2019).

Historically, men have maintained that power and this is obvious when observing the typical portrayal of women within the advertising sphere. Arguably, this is because men of the past have been the only ones accepted to maintain positions of hegemonic power (Ponterotto 2016, p.133) and it has been argued that the differences in gender are intentionally used to justify the inequality and maintain women as subordinates in society (Lorber 1994, p.13). Ridgeway (2009) states that gender has been a cultural frame for shaping societal behaviours indicating that this inequality has been rife for so long that advertisers are recognising the need to move away from it but still find themselves resorting to tactics of the past because audiences are conditioned to accept this type of imagery; the age old "*sex sells*" belief has been king for so long.

This culture of divide between genders that Parks & Robertson (2004) discuss where men are

assumed to be more comfortable than women to hold power only adds more fuel to a fire that has burned for too long in a society trying to emancipate women from objectification. For women to become recognised and valued for who they are not their physical attributes, there needs to be a unified collective from both genders.

This is relevant to Ocean Eyes Swim's campaign, not to undermine men in anyway, but to remind women of their own power and help them celebrate it; just as men have done with theirs for countless years. It is about equality and acceptance, not a power divide.

## **THE RESOLUTION ~ THE OCEAN EYES SWIM REAL, RAW & DIVINE CAMPAIGN**

After conducting my market research to identify my unique selling point in a market already saturated with swimwear brands, I identified the following:

- Observation of the competition revealed several brands consistently use the same recognisable professional models and influencers in their imagery. OES uses real, everyday women from the local community; a unique point of difference that has created a sub-community of brand advocates and provided them with an opportunity to be part of the brand and represent themselves in a small part of the media sphere.
- Audiences are beginning to vocalise their discomfort and disapproval in relation to their current gender representation in advertising and with constantly presented with imagery depicting constant objectification (Frederick et al, 2006, p. 420).

A focus group of 76 Australian men and women was conducted to gain insight from a formerly neglected customer perspective. The results identified a large dissatisfaction with both the lack of diverse body types and the objectification of women portrayed within the media.

Their subjects expressed a desire to see body diversity used in advertising but at a capacity that did not normalise obesity (Diedrichs, Lee, & Kelly, 2011, p. 260).

- Using overly sexual imagery may attract the attention of the viewer, but it does not guarantee increased effectiveness of these ads. It is a simple case of an audience being drawn to witnessing something taboo without making a conscious connection to the brand portraying it (Lull & Bushman, 2015). Several supporting studies have found that no evidence exists to indicate that the use of sexual imagery increased the

effectiveness of certain ads. One pertained that audiences are visually attracted to images of this nature due to our evolutionary natures. Simply, our attention to these cues are hard-wired due to our reproductive evolution. While an ad containing such imagery may have the attention of its audience, any information regarding the brand fails to be recognised (Lull & Bushman, 2015, p. 1030). It provides shock value and nothing more.

- Customers are increasingly apathetic and savvy. E-commerce has democratised the fashion industry and in this evolved retail environment, fashion brands need to develop strategies that speak to the hearts of their customers to gain their attention, rather than just making the most noise. One study conducted a meta-analysis of both men and women that revealed an increase in attention when exposed to sexually driven imagery, with men expressing positive attitudes toward it but recalled little information relative to the brand or product being shown. Women expressed negative responses, also with little recollection regarding the intended product focus of the ad. Both expressed zero purchase intention (Wirtz, Sparks & Zimbres 2017, p. 170).

Conclusively, there is a clear and wilful ignorance demonstrated here on behalf of advertisers that continue to use objectification methods to sell to audiences. With these studies and resources readily available that provide proof and direct feedback from consumers those who continue to push overtly sexual campaigns evidently risk losing engagement and trust from their audiences. One cannot simply build a trusting and honest relationship with their target market if they refuse to listen to what they want and continue to fall back on tactics proven to be an industry problem.

The needs of a customer should be the first consideration for all sales and marketing activity because a key internal driver within all people is need (Kärkkäinen & Elfvengren 2002, p. 85) We can apply Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), a common motivational theory commonly applied to marketing and advertising efforts as it identifies five levels of need that correspond to human requirements: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Marketing a product/ service requires basic understanding of human psychology and consumer behaviour and will assist in creating better communications through marketing (Glaeser 2004, p.210).

Maslow (1943) theorises the hierarchy of human needs in order of importance but when analysed in the same frame of female objectification in advertising, it is frightening how

those hyper sexualised and unattainable representations of beauty work against the basic needs of a human woman.

Below I briefly compare imagery from a Dolce & Gabbana campaign against my own and address how Maslow's theories of human needs are being utilised:

	
<p><b>Dolce and Gabbana Campaign Image</b></p>	<p><b>Ocean Eyes Swim Campaign Image</b></p>
<p><b>Physiological:</b> In fashion terms, while graphically disturbing, the basic human need for clothing is present. The lack of is presenting itself as primal authority of power over the woman. There is no consideration for her physiological needs.</p> <p><b>Safety:</b> The campaign seems to be less about the clothes and more about shock value. It is highly evident that the woman's safety is compromised and what this seems to highlight is power of the men which in some twisted manner, could translate to D&amp;G Men feeling powerful (read, safe) in the designers' clothes.</p> <p><b>Love and belonging:</b> Love is completely absent from this image, however there is a hostile sense of belonging translating from</p>	<p><b>Physiological:</b> Though swimwear can be a sensitive topic for a lot of women, my range aims to provide styles that meet the physiological needs required for typical occasions is worn. The overall idea is that this need can be met for a lot of women within the brand when the situation calls for swimwear.</p> <p><b>Safety:</b> The overall message of my brand values is that my swimwear, while sensitive in nature, is for all women. They can find safety within the Ocean Eyes Swim community. This image of Hannah and her mother was strategically taken to induce feelings of togetherness.</p> <p><b>Love and belonging:</b> Another core value of my brand. The love between and mother and daughter were the intended capture behind</p>

<p>the men that may cause them to behave with such a pack mentality.</p> <p><b>Esteem:</b> There is an evident feeling of prestige within the men but also a sort of, competition between them and the woman is portrayed as an object to devour between them. The clothing, all similar amongst them gives off a power suit vibe, the men are in charge and can take what they want.</p> <p><b>Self-actualization:</b> I feel there is little to no self-actualisation happening here, no one within it is thinking about fulfilling their potential or living their best lives. The image is primitive and lacks self-awareness from all within it.</p>	<p>this image, the matching outfits indicating a belonging between the two of them.</p> <p><b>Esteem :</b> While my brand has no interest in creating prestige within its community, it does create pieces that enhance women's favourite parts of their physical selves, the made to order, customisable nature of it allowing for greater self-expression and therefore greater opportunity for women to feel good in the swimwear they purchase; but it is a collective, a feeling that I am attempting to spread within the brand's community.</p> <p><b>Self-actualization:</b> This is the biggest aspect of Ocean Eyes Swim and its customers, it exists to provide a creative fulfilment within myself and allows me to help other women begin to accept themselves as they are by spreading the message that they already are worthy enough to wear swimwear.</p>
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Comparatively, my campaign creates safety, promotes love, self-love, creativity and encourages women to celebrate themselves. Dolce and Gabbana's image does the opposite; it ostracises audiences and creates no positive relationship with the brand. There is no community building and there is a clear indication the brand does not care to bond with its audience in the same way Ocean Eyes Swim does. The entire image feels like it speaks to its audience, while mine creates engagement with them.

Maslow (1943) argues that people will generally prioritise having food on their tables before they feel the need to purchase fashion products, though there is a portion that will postpone that need in order to wear clothes that gain them social acceptance over nourishment (Jackson & Shaw 2017, p 5). In extreme cases, people with low self esteem could spend more money

on fashion items that give them comfort feelings of social acceptance that comes from owning an in-demand fashion item. This plays heavily on my mind as a small business owner as I am blithely aware that the genuine feelings of self-love and high self-esteem I want for my customers cannot manifest if their absolute physiological, safety and love needs are not first being met; not without playing on their vulnerabilities as so many other advertising campaigns of the past do.

In Australia, we are beginning to see improvements through installation of laws and policy with regulatory commissions introducing guidelines to help combat years of derogatory representation.

In 2021, The AANA (The Australian Association of National Advertisers) introduced an updated code of ethics that explicitly addresses gender depictions and sexualisation in advertising and prohibiting such imagery be used anywhere in outdoor advertising or in cases where the image is not relevant to the product being advertised (2022).

In 2018, the World Federation of Advertisers implemented guidelines surrounding balanced gender portrayals in advertising and the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) updated its code of ethics to instil that where gender-stereotypical roles are portrayed, advertisements must not suggest those activities are always associated with that gender. As an example, not always depicting women undergoing chores in fabric softener commercials or men undertaking repair tasks around the house. To the same effect the Real, Raw and Divine campaign from Ocean Eyes Swim aims to portray women from various walks of life enjoying swimwear, visually free from social implications that dictate they have to be young and thin to be able to enjoy swimwear.

Metaphorically the campaign throws off those constructs; it is not about the swimwear; it is about a collective of women in their rawest forms demonstrating their presence and vibrance and setting the stage for other women who are tired of feeling like they are invisible or unacknowledged.

## **CONCLUSION**

Though this exegesis has compiled significant evidence and data to indicate that objectification of women, while head turning, does not necessarily equate to a successful public relations campaign. All one really has to do is observe comments on guilty social media campaigns to know that female audiences are not happy with the constant

misrepresentations. It really boils down to the simple act of listening to your customer and providing them the best options to meet their needs. Women are practically screaming to be represented in an organic manner than does not minimise their existence as a mere physical form; the praise can be seen on every platform of brands that are doing this successfully. Women are also relinquishing the cultural constructs of the past that saw them bound to kitchen sinks. They no longer accept their roles are that of subordinates relative to male power, instead oozing their own and demanding their individuality be recognised; not in manner that detracts from men but one that asks for the same space.

In addition, in an age where technology has democratised the shopping experience, customers won't readily part with money unless there is an emotional connection or need that is being met. My years in customer service has directly taught me that they will take their time building that level of engagement needed to feel secure in their purchase and the research has proven this.

With so much evidence indicating that women do not agree with their own objectification, and that they want to see themselves properly represented in brand campaigns, I feel I am one of several brands that is listening and taking action with the Real, Raw & Divine campaign. Ocean Eyes Swim is not the first to listen to its audience and respond in a manner that proves their needs are at the centre of its operations. In a sea of brands that continue to exploit women for profit, the number of others who are listening and acting is increasing. Reflecting on the length of time that objectification has been a societal problem, it is fair to say that ending objectification will not be an overnight task, but one that requires a collective awareness and in some cases, the admission of guilt before mindsets can change for the better.

To achieve overall success, both marketers and audiences must understand the downfalls of objectification in advertising and collectively decline to accept those standards. Industry regulators can and do assist which indicates a desire to change on a governmental level but it has to start at the bottom to really be felt; brands must also feel compelled to do the right thing.

Ocean Eyes Swim pledges to forever remain a brand that stands with and for women, real women, from all walks of life. We will use our platform to continuously vocalise the matter with the overall goal of ending objectification of women in media and giving them a safe space where they feel recognised, represented and loved just as they are.

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