SELLING SEXISM: Body Image, Gender and Corporate Advertising

“Sex sells” - as the old saying goes. In consumer advertising, this has typically involved using images of women's bodies to sell us products. Throughout the decades of confronting gender inequality in popular culture, women's movements have had considerable success in addressing issues of body image and sexism in advertising. Yet the problems have shifted and continue to resurface. In this pamphlet we'll take a look at past victories for gender representation and why there is still much to be done to end unwanted corporate advertising in our public spaces and the sexist street harassment it can encourage.

Feminist movements have been amongst the earliest agitators to confront the problems associated with consumer advertising. The second-wave, consciousness-raising cultures of women's groups from the 1970s identified advertising imagery as key sites where gender relations were reproduced and re-enforced. These movements challenged the perception of women's bodies as commodities and public property, as well as highlighting advertising's role in shaming and shaping women's bodies to fit pre-determined conceptions of femininity.

These critiques are now firmly established and recognised. Advertisers have promoted certain body ideals to western audiences, which are increasingly becoming universal across the globe. This includes the selection of models used in advertising shoots to the digital alterations of photos. 

Adblock Bristol presents: The case for an ad-free city
afterwards, removing imperfections, slimming waistlines and airbrushing skin blemishes, even lightening skin.

In 'The Beauty Myth' (1990), Naomi Wolf argues that as women moved further away from their role as housewives and into the workplace, beauty ideals were increasingly used by advertisers and magazines to control, manipulate and to keep women firmly in their role as the primary household consumer. Wolf calls this tactic the ‘beauty myth’ and notes that: “Someone must have figured out that they [women] will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry and sexually insecure state of being aspiring ‘beauties’.”

As we are bombarded with marketing images from a young age, the impacts have been well documented. Eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia have increased in the UK, doubling between 2010 and 2017 with a particular surge amongst teenage girls and women in their early 20s. More recently the constant portrayal of unrealistic beauty and body images in social media, using similar airbrushing and alteration techniques to advertising, has led to a rise in cosmetic surgery requests.

Some brands have been keen to respond to growing consumer concerns regarding body image. In 2004 Dove launched its ‘Real Curves’ campaign using everyday body shapes. Whist the campaign was lauded by some, Dove’s parent company Unilever continued the objectification of women through another one of its brands Lynx deodorant - whose advertising throughout the 1990s and 2000s featured anonymous women powerless against the advances of the ‘Lynx man’ suggesting that using a deodorant spray will directly increase men’s sex appeal. Marketeers argued that the campaign was “tongue-in-cheek”. Critics argued that the ads reinforced the idea of women as passive objects waiting to please in both public and private space.

We see here a typical response of big business to social problems: the creation of new markets. Under Unilever’s brand, two different consumer bases were developed by one parent company which traded on insecurities about women’s bodies and their place in society. No matter that the messages of progressive feminism in Dove adverts clashed with the sexism and toxic masculinity of Lynx adverts. The profits still flow up and idealised images of women’s bodies and femininity are reinforced. Increasingly however, these marketing approaches are being seen as inappropriate and bad for business. Since 2016, Lynx have attempted to change their branding.
n 2015, this latent disquiet at the visual assault by advertising firms spilled over into public outrage. A bright yellow advert for a slimming product by ‘Protein World’ featuring a size 6 model provoked outrage from commuters in London and nearly 400 complaints to the Advertising Standards Agency. The CEO of Protein World took to Twitter to belligerently defend the ad saying, “We are a nation of sympathisers for fatties.”

Rebecca Field, a spokeswoman for eating disorders charity Beat, commented that, “While continuing to promote a slender body image as the only one we should aspire to, the Protein World advert advertises diet products, only adding to the harmful effect it could have on those susceptible for fatties.”

Such was the public outcry that in 2016 the UK’s regulatory bodies for advertising, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Committee Advertising Practice (CAP), looked into the existing guidance on gender stereotyping. Their landmark report Depictions, Perceptions and Harm updated the guidance to advertisers looking at gender roles, gender characteristics, sexualisation, objectification, promotion of unhealthy body image and instances where adverts mocked people for not conforming to a stereotype (for example, an ad which depicts family members creating a mess while a woman has the sole responsibility of cleaning it up.) The report also highlighted cumulative impacts - that whilst seeing one particular ad may not be a problem, seeing many similar messages over time can reinforce and normalise the problems. Ella Smillie, from CAP explained:

“Making assumptions about how people should look and behave might negatively restrict how they see themselves and how others see them, and limit the choices they make in life.”

Following the outcry, London Mayor Sadiq Kahn also announced that ‘body shaming’ adverts would no longer be allowed on Transport for London’s network. The Beach Body Ready protests and subsequent revision of the ASA guidelines show that public protest around both advertising content and advertising itself can lead to significant change. Tobacco advertising has already been heavily limited, and there are various restrictions on placing advertising within 100 metres of schools including around sexualised images, e-cigarettes and gambling.

With women’s bodies seen so regularly in all forms of advertising, many groups are now making the links between marketing messages and more explicit forms of gender-based violence and harassment. The ‘culture of entitlement’ that is promoted by some advertising visual imagery can lead to real world consequences in our streets. Such imagery can send an implicit message that women’s bodies are public property which are there to serve and please. By reinforcing stereotyped ideas of masculinity and femininity they also seek to punish those who do not conform to these presets. This is demonstrated by the high levels of reported street harassment incidents experienced by LGBTQ+ communities.
Advertisements are unavoidable in public space and can reinforce male control of, and entitlement to, that space and the exclusion of women and others. This is also how street harassment is used to control women and others in public spaces. At a conscious and subconscious level, it reminds them of their vulnerability and need to conform to specific ideas of femininity and masculinity in order to remain safe. Street harassment, then, should be understood as an expression of male privilege and domination. Its cultural roots must be addressed.

Laura Bates, Everyday Sexism Project

“It’s a statement of power. It’s a way of letting me know that a man has the right to my body, a right to discuss it, analyse it, appraise it, and let me or anybody else in the vicinity know his verdict, whether I like it or not.”

The Bristol Street Harassment Project collected stories, mainly from local women, of their experiences of street harassment across the city. These often showed how behind a supposed ‘compliment’ was in fact intimidation and potential violence if women did not respond in the positive way expected.

“Someone made a comment about my appearance and called me ‘lovely’ or something similar, and when I didn’t respond he got aggressive and shouted at me.”

The fight against sexist and objectifying advertising in public space is not about shaming and hiding bodies to conform to old-fashioned notions of ‘decency’. It is about challenging advertising’s role in a patriarchal system which constantly enforces inequalities between genders, and the consequences of this for society in terms of the normalisation of gender-based violence and harassment.

Tough responses to street harassment have also increased with fines imposed in France and various police forces in the UK, including Avon and Somerset Police, encouraging the reporting of gender/misogyny hate crimes, including street harassment incidents. A holistic understanding of misogyny demands that we look at a wide range of cultural factors that contribute to it - and this includes who has control of and what messages are seen prominently in the visual realm. Communities and cities around the world are already standing up to the outdoor advertising industry. The cities of Sao Paolo in Brazil and Grenoble in France have both banned billboards. There is a growing movement for Bristol to become the first city in the UK to remove corporate outdoor advertising as well.

We all have a role to play in challenging the impact of advertising in our cities and similarly we can ensure that street harassment is not accepted and those who experience it are supported. Find out more from the Bristol Street Harassment toolkit: http://www.bristolzerotolerance.com/take-action/take-action-as-an-individual/

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