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# **Hidden Messages**

**Advertising and the Messages They Send to Society About Women**

By  
Alyssa Michaelides

## **Introduction**

The advertising industry has always used innovative ways to attract consumers to the product or service being peddled. In the past two decades however, advertising methods have become more and more controversial, many times bordering on obscene to catch the consumer's eye. Competition is tough; there are thousands and thousands of products being advertised everyday, everywhere. The average American is exposed to over 5,000 messages a day (Larson 4). As society becomes more and more numb to the constant stream of stimuli they encounter everyday, advertisers go further and further in their quest to grab attention.

One group that the advertising world has specifically set their sights on is women. For decades advertisers have come up with an "ideal" for the perfect woman. This woman represents what five percent of women look like, yet this body type represents 98% percent of the women seen in the media (Kilbourne). The advertising world has used this image to sell everything from cigarettes to clothing to household items. The constant message being sent is that women are not good enough the way they are and they need the products and services being sold to improve themselves.

Not only does advertising send these messages, but as Jean Kilborne a researcher who is the author of many books and movies on advertisings affect on women's body image has shown advertisers are also glorifying and making sexy the things that are opposite of an empowered woman. Kilborne shows patterns in advertising and messages that unless you are looking for and are away of, you would simply digest without questioning. According to Kilborne advertisers glorify and perpetuate stereotypes and

make ideals out of images of models with vacant expressions and wasted bodies (Kilbourne).

This is a study of the images that fill women's magazines and what those images symbolize. The idea that a woman is never happy with her body has become so accepted that it is rare for one to take the time to understand why that is the case and what is causing it. Mainstream women's magazine boost millions of subscribers every year and each of these magazines are packed with messages that women need to improve themselves and that the ideal body type is the only type that is acceptable.

This is an important study because as these messages become more and more prevalent, younger and younger girls are becoming affected by these messages. In a survey of fourth graders 80% of them said they were on a diet (Kilbourne). By feeling pressured to diet and feel skinny these young girls are doing irreversible damage to their growing bodies. The message that is being given through the media and through advertising is a major factor in women's poor body image. Only through awareness of what these messages are truly saying and symbolizing can the consumer understand what they are being sold and it is rarely merely a product.

If consumers and society on a whole understand and are made aware of the messages that are being shown in these magazines and on television then they will be able to make informed decisions about what they don't want to buy and what they don't want to buy into. The only reason that the advertising world has been able to dictate what people should look like, what is sexy and desired is because the consumer continues to

blindly consume without taking a good look at what is being sold and what messages are being sent.

### **Literature Review**

Many experiments and studies have already been conducted concerning advertising and women's body image. While much of the studies are on the affects of advertising, there is very little information on what exactly the messages are that are being sent to the consumer in these advertisements.

In a study named *Highly Attractive Models in Advertising and the Women Who Loathe Them: The Implications of Negative Affect for Spokesperson Effectiveness* author Amanda B. Bower studied the use of highly attractive models (HAMs) to sell to consumers and their effectiveness. In this study Bower questions to use of HAMs as the ideal of thinness is a very sensitive issue for women and women who they cannot match up to may put them off. "Researchers already have established that some women compare themselves with the idealized images in advertising and that some women who compare themselves with these HAMs may experience negative feelings as a result" (Bower, 1).

The two hypotheses proposed are: "among comparers, negative affect will be negatively related to evaluations of HAM expertise", and "among comparers, negative affect will be negatively related to evaluations of the HAM as a product argument". In the first study one hundred thirty female undergraduate students were told that they would receive extra credit if they participated in the study. They were given a folder that contained an advertisement of a HAM selling a treadmill and asked to evaluate the ad according to provided questions. The participants were asked a series of questions and

based on a Likert Scale to rate the models beauty in comparison to the other HAMs that they saw in advertisements, how the model made them feel about their own body, if the product made the model more beautiful, and if the model made them feel that the product could make them more beautiful.

The results showed that 51% of the participants compared themselves to the model, and that those comparers had significantly more negative feelings about the ad. In addition, more comparers found the model more beautiful than did non-comparers. “The results from this study support the hypothesis that a rising negative affect in a comparer is associated with decreased evaluations of the model as both a reliable spokesperson and product argument” (Bower, 8).

In a study entitled *Measuring Up: How Advertising Affects Self-Image* author Vicki Shields asserts that seeing the same image of a youthful thin women leads to men and women having an impossible ideal of what a woman should look like and puts physical appearance at the forefront of a woman’s mind. Shields asserts that because these images make female consumers feel that they have to measure up to these women in magazines they end up spending huge amounts of money on beauty products that they feel will make them look more like the women featured in these advertisements.

In a survey of men and women and their reactions to several advertisements Shields discovered that women are much more affected by advertisements that represent prevailing stereotypes of sex roles and ritualized gender behavior. Shields found that the constant repetitions of these images became “so fundamental to a woman’s feelings of self-worth and social valuation and subordination to eating disorders, low self-esteem,

even rape” (Shields). She also asserts that these ads encourage women to be viewed as objects by “the all important male”.

In *Killing Us Softly III* a video studying the affect of advertising uses over 160 print advertisements and TV commercials to critique how advertisements use women. The author Jean Kilbourne, lectures and uses examples to show how messages are being sent to the public concerning women’s body image undetected for the most part. She argues that there are advertisements in the media each and every day that degrade women and reinforce stereotypes and encourage the objectification of women. The film is very powerful and helps the viewer become more and more aware of what they are truly seeing when they open the pages of a magazine. She breaks down the types of advertisements into categories to further help the consumer understand what they are seeing.

### **Research Question**

As the literature review has illustrated the issue of advertising messages and their effect on women’s body image is very pertinent. Women are being victimized everyday and it is being glorified. This study is about the advertisements in popular women’s magazines and what messages those advertisements are sending.

RQ: What messages are being sent through the advertisements in women’s fashion magazines and with what regularity are these messages being sent?

This following report attempts to answer this question and discuss what the findings mean, in addition to posing further research questions.

## Methodology

### Text

This study was a textual analysis of the rhetorical and visual messages of advertisements from women's fashion magazines. There were four magazines chosen: *W*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, and *In Style*. These magazines were chosen because they are popular women's magazines with an extensive circulation. The magazines were chosen of the fashion genre because this genre is very much concentrated on how women should look and dress. The four magazines are all issues from the months of October and November 2004. The magazines are geared at middle to upper class women and are mainstream magazines that are found in hair salons, in grocery stores and in bathrooms. These are the magazines that many of today's women are going to for fashion tips, health and diet issues and entertainment.

### Procedure

First the ads in the four magazines were looked over to define categories that the messages featured in the ad portrayed. 13 different categories were determined. Starting with *Glamour*, then *Elle*, then *In Style* and finally *W*, the magazines were looked through page-by-page. Each ad was noted on a sheet with the 13 categories under the heading it fell into. The categories were: Women laying down, draped over chairs or being supported women with something on or around them that looked like bondage, nudity that was unnecessary and added only for shock value, a woman's body used as an object text that was

demeaning and/or stereotypical, images that perpetuated stereotypes, the silencing of women symbolized by a hand or object partially or fully covering her mouth, racial stereotypes perpetuated, women made up to look like dolls or mannequins, ads for ways a woman can improve herself, images of male domination, ads of happy women looking strong, and ads that did not feature women in them.

These categories were chosen for specific reasons. According to Jean Kilborne images of women being supported by a man, being carried, or having to lean on something is a reoccurring theme in advertisements. Instead of a woman being able to support herself and stand firmly on her own feet she must be helped, or is draped over a chair or strewn on the floor. The idea of the passive, inactive women is prevalent even in advertisements for children's items. Often times the little boys in the ads will be running around playing, while the little girls sit and play with a doll or just watch the little boy have fun. The little boys are almost always taller than the girls and are shown in the forefront of the ad. These roles are reversed however when the little girl is Caucasian and the boy is African American (Kilbourne). In these instances the little girl is often taller and standing while she looks down on the little boy who is sitting.

There are also many ads of women who are in some sort of bondage looking outfit or accessory. Often they are wearing chains or leather straps while they are scantily clad. These images glorify the idea of a woman being in chains and turn it into something sexy and provocative. Much in the same way, images of only women's body parts and not the whole women are extremely objectifying. By separating the woman's body parts

and seeing them as objects relates to the idea of women as objects. If a man sees just legs, butts, arms, and stomachs than he is not looking at the entire woman and seeing her a person. This objectification can become dangerous when it leads to violence towards women when they are seen as objects. These images go right along with that idea. Often women's body parts are used as the models for perfume and liquor bottles, or even as legs to a table. There are many images in which parts of a woman truly become inanimate objects.

Along these same lines the use of unnecessary nudity continues to objectify women. Most of the ads are products that are being sold to women, and yet the advertisers think that a naked will help sell them. The image of a young naked woman in only a pair of boots is not necessary to sell the boots and yet it is so often used. Women's naked bodies accompany these products as side items, sideshows. These bodies serve as an attention grabber to get the consumer to take the time to look at the product.

Another category is the rhetoric used to perpetuate and capitalize on stereotypes. Many of these ads used words that sent the message that the important things in a woman's life are jewelry and clothes. In addition to this another category is images that perpetuate stereotypes. There are many images that show women only being concerned about how they look and themselves. Some poked fun at how women aren't good at changing tires but they can put on makeup at 55 mph. These ads portray women as mindless, empty, clichés that fit right into the role that society has made for them.

In another way racial stereotypes are portrayed in ads. Often there are images of African American women as wild animals, or more specifically cats (Kilbourne). They

are shown with animal prints on in a jungle setting or acting very overtly sexual and animalistic. This is a mutation of the idea of the “Jezebel”, the caricature of African American women as sexual predators who are animalistic and wild.

Another category is the silencing of women. The advertisements in this category feature a woman with her hand covering her mouth, biting her lip back, or holding something in front of her mouth. One of the characteristics society wants out of a woman is a quiet girl who isn’t opinionated. A silent, beautiful woman continues to be shown as desirable in advertisements.

The category that features women made up to look like dolls is another example of how women are shown as objects. When women are shown as dolls or mannequins it again reinforces the idea that the silent woman is desired. It sends a message of shrinking back, being quieter, daintier, more “feminine”. In addition to these messages that encourage and solicit the objectification of women, there are many advertisements that are merely trying to make women feel that they are not good enough the way they are. Ads for make-up, diet products, teeth whiteners are all advertisements that show a digitally rendered model and the idea that not only can you look like her; you should *want* to look like her because she is what is desired. Tag lines that scream “no wrinkles”, “less cellulite”, “whiter and brighter smile” are all telling women that the natural things that happen to their bodies are ugly and wrong and that they must buy these products to combat these affects.

The next category is one of male domination. Ads in this category where chosen if they showed a man dominating a woman, a woman looking frightened at a man, or any

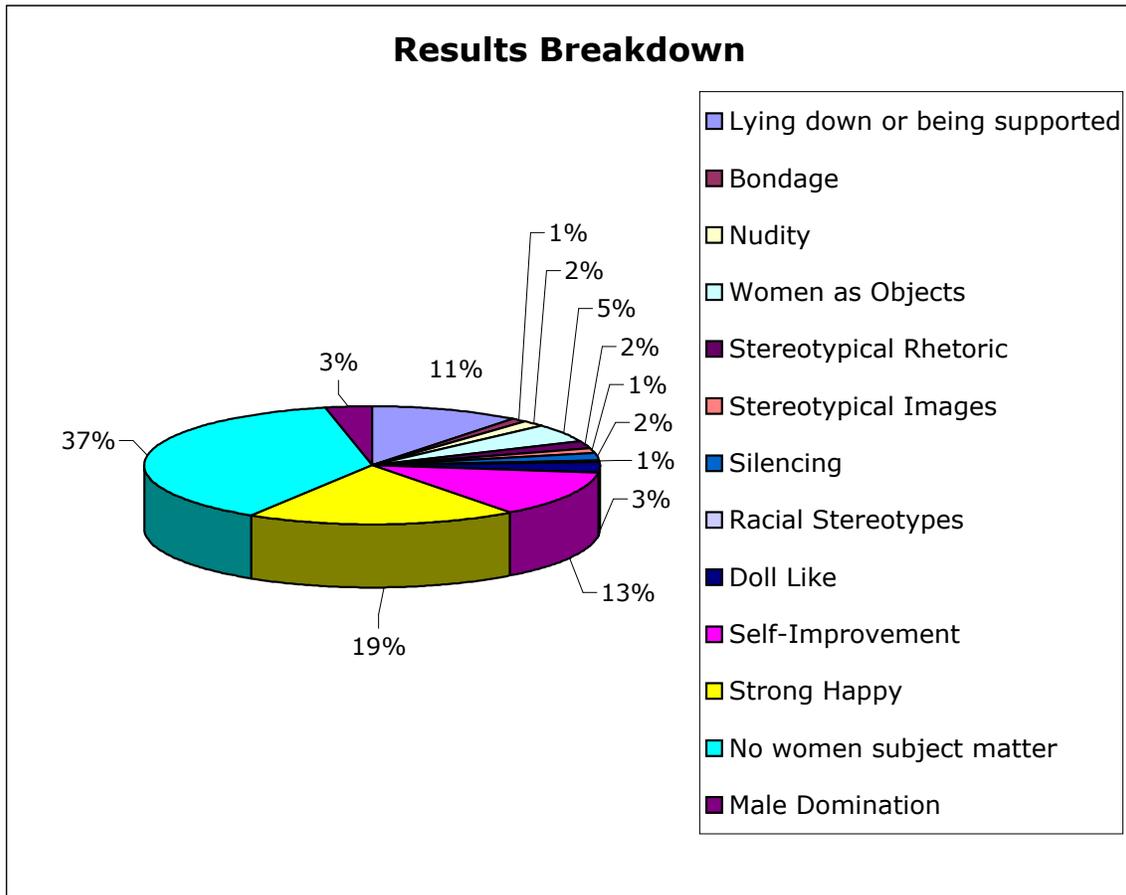
sort of glorification of violent sex. While on a conscious level people reject the idea of sexual force and male domination it is still glorified in many ways. The large man overpowering the small woman and winning her over despite the fact that she fought him is a constant theme in novels, movies and advertisements. The idea is that it is sexy for a woman to fight off a man and for the man to continue to push and then, suddenly the woman relents and gives in to her desires. This is supposed to be exciting and erotic while it is actually glorifying rape and physical abuse.

The last two categories are ads from the magazines that did not contain pictures of women, and ads that featured women looking strong, happy and in positions that did not make them look at all victimized. Because almost all advertisements in women's magazines feature beautiful and skinny women and despite the fact that they do not represent the other 95% of the population it seemed more intuitive to acknowledge that the models would have that body type and break the categories down beyond that point.

Each ad was analyzed and marked under the category under which it fell. As there were many ads that were repeated throughout the four magazines, these ads were counted and placed in the category only once and then were ignored every other time they showed up. This was only done if the ads were an exact replica of one that had already be accounted for, different ads for the same company were all counted each time they appeared as long as they were only included once.

The number of ads in each category were then counted and added up to find totals. Then the totals of each category were individually divided by the total number of ads to find what percentage of total ads these categories represented.

Results



The results are as follows: No women used in the ad made up 37% of the ads, women shown as being strong and happy made up 19%, ads that encouraged women to buy products to improve themselves constituted 13%, ads that showed women laying listlessly around or being held up or leaning on men made up of 11%. Women's body parts shown as an object made up 5%. Images of women being made up like dolls and images of male dominance each made up 3%. Silencing, stereotypical rhetoric, and excessive and unnecessary nudity each made up 2%. The perpetuation of stereotypical images, bondage, and the perpetuation of racial stereotypes each made up one percent.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study show that there are in fact a high percentage of advertisements in popular women's magazines that could be harmful to a women's body image and the way women on a whole are perceived. The ads that are leading to many of the eating disorders and body issues in women are being sold right under their noses in the most popular and well-read magazines available.

Photographers are being rewarded for taking pictures that show women naked, frail, and weak looking. The companies that run these advertisements are some of the biggest names in fashion, beauty, tobacco, and alcohol. These designers and labels sell millions and millions of dollars worth of product to the very consumer that is being harmed by their advertising campaigns. They are getting away with showing these images and glorifying them because essentially women are taking their word for gospel.

If these big names deem that skinny, sickly pale women are sexy the public does not refute that and continues to buy the products.

An Estee Lauder advertisement even goes so far as to boast that they are “Defining Beauty”. The way they are defining beauty is with three supermodels, one being Elizabeth Hurley. If this is the definition of beauty how are the rest of the women supposed to feel good about their bodies and their looks? Estee Lauder is essentially saying, this is what is beauty, we are telling you what is beautiful and what is beautiful are these three women. This is the standard of beauty.

So far the way that these companies have been advertising has been working for them. They have been very successful as most of the main companies are big names like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, La Perla, Calvin Klien, ect. These are some of the most prominent names in fashion and their way of advertising has helped dictate what a successful advertising campaign is. The campaign is one with incredibly skinny women with empty gazes and a “detachedness” about them. These women are not plugged in to what is going on, they are bored with life, somewhat above it. They stare back at the camera with glazed over eyes, sometimes looking past the camera into the distance, yet seeming to not really be looking as much as zoning off.

While there is a high percentage of ads that feature women that are happy, looking strong and healthy there is still far to many ads that still glamorize the skinny, sickly, bored look, in addition to the glamorization of violence against women, and the perpetuation of stereotypes. There is no variety of body types, skin types or age to show that there is more than one way to define beauty. As it stands all of these clothes and

products are made for the “elite” few that count themselves among the five percent of women that have the body type shown in advertisements. Everyone else must try and look like these women by wearing the clothes, using the diet product or skin product, or makeup. The advertisers pose a problem “You don’t look like this, and this is beauty”. Then they propose a solution “Wear our product and try to look more like this”.

Until there is an outcry including a boycotting of these products and the magazines that feature these advertisements, the companies and advertisers will continue down the path that they have been on for so long. As ads become more and more alarming the consumer becomes more and more numb to the messages being sent. Out of the many advertising campaigns in this study there was only one that spoke out against the standard of beauty.

The Dove company has run a series of ads that challenges the standard of beauty that has been set in the media so far. The ad is a six full page layout that features a series of women that are not model types with questions like “Will society ever accept old can be beautiful?”, “Why aren’t women glad to be gray?”, “Does sexiness depend on how full your cups are?”, “Does beauty mean looking like everyone else?”, and “Does true beauty only squeeze into a size 6?”. Then on the final page there is this statement:

For too long, beauty has been defined by narrow, unattainable stereotypes. It’s time to change all that. Because Dove believes real beauty comes in many shapes, sizes, colors and ages. It’s why we started the campaign for real beauty. And why we hope you’ll take part. Together, let think, talk, debate and learn how to make beauty real again.”

This ad was found only once in the magazines in this study and was the only one that featured women that were not model types. This ad is the beginning to recognizing a problem and unifying people to make a difference. As this is the first ad campaign of its type its success is yet to be determined, however in one case the ad campaign alone led to a purchase of the product.

All in all the study supported the studies that assert that women are portrayed in less than progressive ways in advertisements.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. For one, many times the ads fell into more than one category and it was a judgment call to decide which one it represented most. Secondly, because there were many ads that were repeats of each other throughout the different magazines, it might be better to study one or two magazines over the course of the year to see the ways the ad campaigns were changing and so there would be less likelihood of running into the same ads.

While this was a small sample size it very accurately represents the patterns of advertisements in women's fashion magazines so having a small sample size was not a hindrance. The percentages are probably representative of what they would be across the board if you were to study all women's fashion magazines. Another limitation to this study was researching only print advertisements. An advantage to this however, is that many fashion companies do not advertise on television, and many of the companies that advertise on television also advertise in magazines so there was a culmination of many companies that were gearing products towards women. A fourth limitation was that there

was only one type of magazine studied. It would be interesting to see how the ads change and if the same types of themes are carried through to different types of women's magazines only in different ways. Do the same categories show up in a parenting magazine as they do in a high fashion magazine, only shown in a different way?

A final limitation is that the study ended with the determination that many advertisements in women's fashion magazines are negative towards women and their happiness and progression. To truly evaluate how negative these advertisements really are, it would be imperative to survey women or do some sort of evaluation to see how they are affected by the advertisements. How has their body image and sense of self changed as they have become more and more exposed to images of what a woman "should" look like. Are women who are surrounded by more of these types of advertisements less likely to be happy with their bodies than women who are not exposed to them as much?

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not there were advertisements in women's fashion magazines that were negative towards women, however the true issue is how the women who see these advertisements are affected. Without understanding and determining if there is a strong correlation between these images and women's body image it is harder to understand what these ads truly mean.

Further research questions would include: "How are women's feeling about themselves affected after being exposed to a series of advertisements?". A follow up to the study conducted in this report would be in depth interviews with women of all ages and races to determine how they feel about the advertisements in these magazines. What

words do they use when they describe what is considered beautiful? How do they feel they compare to the women featured in these advertisements?

Another way to further this study would be to ask women how they feel and what they see going on in advertisements that fall into the categories used in this study. When they see a picture of a woman with her hand covering her mouth do they cognitively see a woman being told that silent is beautiful? Or do they see a woman who is being coy and secretive? What do they see when they see a pale model laying across the ground gazing into the distance?

After asking this series of questions, then the participants should be shown *Killing Us Softly* so that they are educated on what these ads may represent. After holding a discussion about how they feel after seeing the movie and really letting the information seep in, then the women should again be exposed to the same series of advertisements and answer the same questions. This would show if there is a difference in the way women perceive these ads after they have shown a different side to them. If this is proven to be so, then there is a better idea of if the public were made aware of the harmful images many advertisements use would they be as willing to simply buy into them and continue to consume the product? Or would they recognize a problem and be moved to demand a solution?

This study is merely a stepping-stone of a path to making a more aware consumer. A consumer that is much more discerning and one that questions what is being shown instead of just being numb to it. There are two schools of thought concerning advertising. One is that advertising reflects what is happening in society, and the other is that

advertising causes what is going on society. If the latter is more the case, than a non-distinguishing consumer could truly be led in whatever direction the advertising world wishes. At this point advertising has rarely had to answer to the consumer, and the way that women are being represented in these ads certainly solicits an answer. However it takes an aware public to ask questions, and if consumers do not take a more active role in understanding what they are being sold, they will continue to fall victim to the demands of advertisers.

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