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“How Dirty Boys Get Clean” – on sexual objectification of women in advertising before and after #metoo era

Abstract

The portrayal of women in the advertising industry has been a topic of ongoing debate for over four decades. Advertisers worldwide have been consistently accused of perpetuating inappropriate and degrading stereotypes of women, including their bodies and their perceived roles in a male-dominated society. Although recent years have seen increased public awareness of such harmful practices, with #metoo movement and some prominent brands promoting the concept of women’s empowerment, significant progress towards portraying women in a manner that respects their dignity and avoids reducing them to sexual objects still remains rather elusive. The primary objective of this paper is to analyse the representation of women in selected printed advertisements from the past two decades of advertising and determine whether there has been any significant shift in recent years. Additionally, the paper seeks to examine the possible implications of sexual objectification in contemporary advertising, with a particular focus on the potential transition from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification.

Keywords: sexual objectification, women in advertising, stereotypical portrayal of women, self-objectification

Introduction

Advertising has been playing a very significant role in the commercial landscape for many years. Individuals are frequently exposed to multiple TV and print advertisements for popular products that typically feature partially clothed women with their heads often excluded from the frame, instead focusing on their exaggerated female features such as large breasts, slim bodies, and long legs. These advertisements frequently depict women in provocative, sexually suggestive poses that are often associated with sexual acts. This

barrage of advertising has been present in glossy magazines, TV commercials, and towering billboards in city centres.

Over the years, women's bodies have become commodified goods, utilized primarily to entice (male) customers into buying particular products or services. These advertisements have commonly employed *pictorial* or *visual metaphors*, in which women's bodies are used in a way that elicits numerous sexual associations. Strikingly, these adverts have one common characteristic feature: different products, services, or ideas are advertised through highly sexualized images that depict men or, more often, women in suggestive gestures and poses that evoke strong sexual connotations. In most instances, the partially naked body takes centre stage, while the product is presented somewhere in the background.

The presentation of females in many adverts is often referred to as 'objectification,' which can be described as "an attitude that regards a person as a commodity or as an object for use, with insufficient regard for a person's personality or sentience" (Barry, 1994: 247). Women are depicted as submissive beings, always eager to satisfy men's deepest desires, as in Axe or Skyy Vodka print advertisements. This phenomenon, according to Bartky (1990: 26), is referred to as 'sexual objectification' and can be defined as "the practice of regarding or treating another person merely as an instrument (object) towards one's sexual pleasure." The use of sexuality in advertising, intentionally or not, promotes particular values and attitudes towards sex as an integral part of the product being advertised.

The primary aim of this paper is to present and analyse selected advertisements associated with well-known brands, including Axe, Skyy Vodka, and Dolce & Gabbana, which used to employ highly sexualized images of women for many years, especially prior to #metoo movement that gained its momentum in October 2017. In many advertisements released before that period, women's roles were often limited to satisfying male desires and fulfilling male fantasies. The focus of the analysis will be on the concept of each advert and the extent to which women's sexual objectification has been portrayed in printed advertisements over the past two decades. The paper aims to investigate whether such popular companies have altered their attitudes towards the depiction of women in their advertisements throughout years. A critical question posed by this study is how such advertisements can impact women's self-esteem, dignity, and perceived attractiveness in the long term, given that their bodies are reduced to objects of male desire.

Verbal versus non-verbal metaphor

Advertising can be defined as a means of creating images that influence the imagination of potential customers. This definition leads us to the concept of metaphor, which is often associated with "a device of poetic imagination and rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language" (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980: 4). The authors claim that metaphor is usually seen as a characteristic of language alone, rather than thought or action. However, Lakoff and Johnson found that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but also in thought and action. Kovecses (2010: ix) states that "for most of us, metaphor is a figure of speech, in which one thing is compared to another by

saying that one is the other, as in 'He's a lion'." According to Kovecses, people use words metaphorically to achieve some artistic and rhetorical effect, to communicate eloquently, to impress others with aesthetically pleasing words, or to express deep emotions.

It is worth mentioning that Lakoff and Johnson challenged the widely held view of metaphor by claiming that (1) metaphor is a property of concepts rather than words; (2) the function of metaphor is to better understand certain concepts, not just to serve artistic or aesthetic purposes; (3) metaphor is often not based on similarity; (4) metaphor is used effortlessly in everyday life by ordinary people, not just by special talented individuals; and (5) metaphor, far from being a superfluous yet pleasing linguistic ornament, is an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning (Kovecses, 2010: x).

Apart from *verbal* metaphors we can also distinguish between other two types: *pictorial* or *visual* metaphor. Contrary to verbal metaphors, pictorial or visual metaphors use pictorial or visual devices that suggest identity to encourage metaphorical insight in viewers. This means that one thing presented visually ("target") is compared to something belonging to a different category ("source"). Forceville (2001: 2) notes that pictorial metaphors can occur in images of all kinds, but identifying both the aspects in which pictorial (visual) metaphors differ from verbal ones and the aspects they share is one of the main challenges in developing the theory of metaphors.

Concept in advertising

In contemporary advertising, the paramount objective is to make a given product appealing to potential customers and to create the most effective advertising strategy possible. To achieve this, marketers rely on the creation of a concept, a term used to describe the central idea behind an advertisement (Barry, 2011: 6). The concept incorporates a range of messages, such as the notion that "innocence can be sexy," as evidenced by Calvin Klein's use of provocative imagery featuring relatively young people. In some cases, an advertisement may associate pain, brutality, and violence with sexiness, stylishness, and glamour, as is sometimes depicted by Versace.

Other advertisements may suggest that women are inherently submissive and enjoy being dominated by men, as can be seen in some of D&G's adverts. Alternatively, women may be presented as an accessory to a particular product, as in Skyy Vodka's advertisements. In controversial Axe advertisements, the advertiser attempts to persuade the audience that the use of their product will make them more attractive to the opposite sex. While these examples are the most representative for the purpose of this paper, it is worth noting that there are many more messages that can be inferred from similar adverts.

(Why) does sex sell?

In contemporary society, individuals are inundated with numerous advertisements that compete for their attention. According to Long (2010), the average American used to be exposed to approximately 3000 advertising messages per day, and corporations worldwide

spend more than \$620 billion annually to make their products more appealing to consumers. Companies have been using various methods to target the potential customer's feelings, desires, or needs, and one of the most frequent and controversial methods is to allude to sex. Long (2010) argues that sexual content is more and more often present in promotional adverts for a wide range of branded goods in a way that even such products as tin-openers or tires are sometimes advertised by half-naked attractive female models.

Levit (2005) explains that sex appeal is effective because it attracts the customer's attention, stating that it is in our nature to be curious about sex. Reichert (2008) supports this view, asserting that sexual information is attention-grabbing because it evokes a hard-wired emotional response that is linked to species survival. Thus, the use of sexualized images in advertisements can draw an individual's attention and hold it. However, the studies conducted by Reichert and Lambiase (2008) reveal that almost three-quarters of sexual ads in magazines contained a sex-related brand benefit, following the "buy this, get this" formula. For example, Axe body spray's concept is that "a young man sprays it on, and attractive women find him irresistible," with numerous benefits of using the product, including increased sexual attraction and more sexual opportunities. Consequently, this formula seemed to be a successful advertising strategy.

However, the frequent use of sexualized images of naked-skinned male and female models led to a dangerous phenomenon known as 'sexual objectification,' not only among feminist societies. Brands such as Axe or Skyy Vodka particularly affected women, presenting them as subordinate beings, completely dependent on men, and stripped of dignity and self-identity.

Sexual objectification in theory

Objectification theory, first proposed and comprehensively examined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), posits that sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or perceived as capable of representing her. This theory suggests that women are frequently treated as mere bodies, whose sole purpose is to provide pleasure for others. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997: 175) point out that women have little control over the objectifying gaze that is often directed towards them and that few women are able to avoid potentially objectifying situations. This objectifying gaze can manifest itself in actual interpersonal and social interactions, in visual media that depict these interactions, and in situations where viewers are exposed to "spotlight bodies or body parts and seamlessly align viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze" (Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997: 176).

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that women's bodies are more frequently targeted for sexual objectification than men's bodies, as evidenced by analyses of the portrayal of women in various advertisements, mainstream films, TV programs, visual arts, and women's magazines. In addition, studies by Cowan (1995) and Leidholdt (1981) indicate that sexualized images are often associated with stereotypes based on race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class. For example, African American women are frequently

presented not only as objects of sexual fulfilment, but also as animals. Similarly, Szymanski, Moffit, and Carr (2011: 8) argue that lesbian and same-sex female relationships are increasingly sexualized in the media to appeal to male fantasies of sexual involvement with multiple women. In contrast, the sexual exploitation and victimization of African American women from the days of slavery to the present has led to media images and stereotypes of Black women as sexual aggressors and savages (Greene, 1994; Thomas, Witherspoon, Speight, 2004). Similarly, Asian American women are often portrayed in the media as sexually subservient, childlike, and exotic (Root, 1995). Women from lower social classes are often viewed as gross, overly sexualized, untamed, crude, and deserving of sexual exploitation and aggression (Pharr, 1988; Smith, 2008).

The portrayal of males and females in the media used to differ significantly. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997: 176), men tend to be portrayed in print media and artwork with an emphasis on the head and face and with greater facial detail, while women are depicted with an emphasis on the body. This difference between “face-ism” and “body-ism” can be considered objectifying, as the media portray women as if their bodies were capable of representing them (Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997: 177). Unfortunately, the mass media’s proliferation of sexualized images of the female body is extensive and rapid, making it difficult for ordinary viewers to escape exposure to such images. These images are likely to affect most girls and women to varying degrees, according to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997).

Sexual objectification of women in advertising before #metoo era – selected examples

At the beginning of the new millennium, it was evident that women’s bodies were frequently exploited as a powerful marketing tool. This trend became even more evident in the following years. Between 2004 and 2017 it was common to encounter advertisements that prominently featured attractive female models who were typically tall, slim, tanned, with exaggerated physical features such as large breasts or long legs, and is positioned in provocative poses. In some cases, the model’s face is even obscured, as the primary focus is on her physical appearance. Many leading brands now employ such objectifying portrayals of women in their advertisements, with the underlying message being that men should purchase the advertised product to gain access to attractive women who will fulfil their desires.

One of such brands was Axe (also known as Lynx in the UK, Ireland and Australasia), a company launched in 1983 in France. The brand has offered male grooming products such as deodorant body sprays, shower gels and antiperspirants. Unilever advertises Axe/Lynx products as those that have been created so as to “to keep guys a step ahead in the dating game”, the product that is supposed to generate women’s ecstasy and have them chasing men all over the world. Its ads have been known for using images full of sexual connotations, depicting women as subordinate, submissive and selfless beings. Figure 1 presents a typical advert for Axe shower gel launched between 2006 and 2007

under the following advertising campaign: “Any Excuse to Get Dirty”. In the centre of the image you can see an extremely attractive young blonde female, who is portrayed in quite a provocative posture as she is leaning towards the potential customer, with her eyes winking, mouth semi-open, her arm resting on the hip and the most prominent part of the image – full breasts sticking out of her tight costume. The scenery is also significant as it is an interior of a kind of diner or a cocktail bar, which are places visited by many people every day. There is also a slogan that can be seen in the right bottom corner of the image which tells “Any excuse to get dirty”. To confirm the slogan’s words, there is a spilt milkshake on the table and the woman’s hair is submerged in this liquid substance. However, she does not seem to be concerned, rather it looks as if she has spilt the milkshake intentionally and is trying to encourage any male who is using Axe to come and wash her. There have been more ads launched under the aforementioned campaign, including a woman sitting on a sculpture with pigeons flying around her and defecating on her, and a teacher leaning on a desk in a provocative pose, her shirt unbuttoned and her breasts nearly out of the bra. The company’s message can be read out in many ways, but the most probable seems to be: “Buy our product and you can have a sex opportunity, even in a public place”. A right-hand side part of her chest (including the breast area) and her right hand are covered with kids-crayon scribbles. It is really hard to say what the company had in mind while creating such an advert. It seems that they found “any excuse” to sell their products to their male customers.



Figure 1. Advertisement of Axe Shower Gel (1)

Source: Dr Prem – Business & Leadership, <https://drprem.com/business/axe-shower-gel-any-excuse-to-get-dirty> [accessed: 14.12.2023].

The company’s “creativity” seemed to have no limits, as in 2008 they released another advert (Figure 2) that turned out to be one of the most popular and the most controversial

at the same time. What is particularly striking in this case is the technique of portraying female and her body which definitely corresponds to “body-ism” mentioned by Friedrichson and Roberts (1997). We can easily notice a close-up only on the “strategic parts” of the body, which means that breasts, stomach and upper leg/vagina/hip region are exploited, while the head is ‘cut off’. Hence, the viewer’s attention is automatically lead to those parts and they are supposed to create sexual (so highly positive) associations with the product advertised. As it can be seen, the woman is standing in the corner of a (bath) room with no place to go – this situation leaves her helpless and defenceless. Since the woman is covered with mud and wants to be washed by the male viewer, the advertisement comes into play: “Just buy Lynx shower gel and you can wash this helpless and attractive female, as well”.

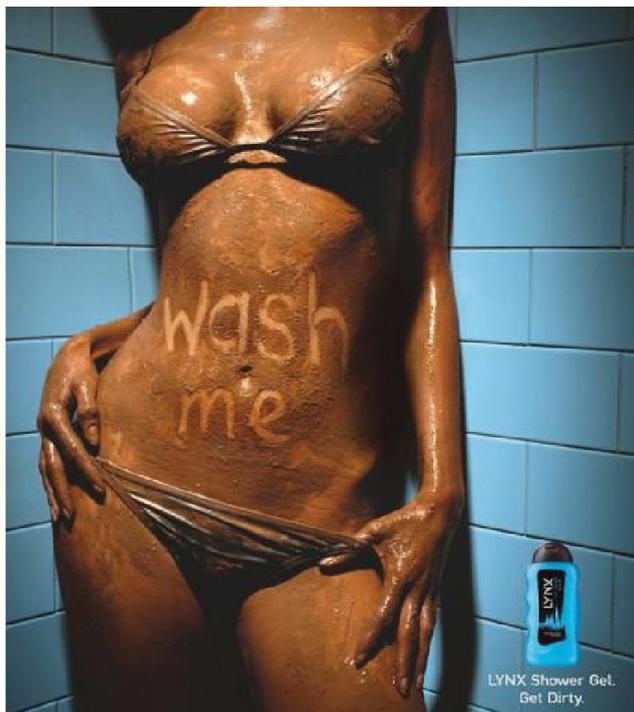


Figure 2. The advertisement of LYNX Shower Gel (2)

Source: Ads of the World, https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/lynx_wash_me [accessed: 15.12.2023].

Although at that time Axe seemed to be out of competition regarding their sexist commercials, there was a company that was trying hard to dethrone them. Skyy Vodka, the brand launched in 1992 (San Francisco, US) has been advertised as “the leading vodka with a smooth, clean taste” and became “quickly recognized as the brand of quality, style and innovation” according to its descriptions on the producer’s webpage. Their advertisements from 2009 clearly show that the brand uses glamour images, portraying both

males and females as very stylish (even posh) and affluent representatives of the American upper-class. However, when we take a closer look at the way of presenting of both sexes, there are significant differences in the subjects' position towards his/her partner, way of clothing etc. as in the examples below (Figure 3 & Figure 4). Both examples put women in submissive positions comparing to dominant men. It seems men have more authority, more money and more power over the women who have no other choice but to enjoy their company and start to drink vodka with them. Interestingly, the framing of the picture presented as Figure 3 shows the crotch area as being directly over the face of the woman and it is emphasized to accentuate that area. The woman's breasts are also lighted in the way to lead the reader's eye automatically to that area. The product in this Figure 3 becomes secondary because the reader will be attracted to the breasts and crotch, and then realize that is an ad for a vodka (in the ad presented in Figure 4, where the product itself is located in the central position so that the potential customer is able to notice it immediately). To conclude, money dominates in both adverts since they portray the male's dominance over and superiority in relation to the woman. Their hidden message can be that, firstly – money can buy everything – the best alcohol can go along with the most beautiful women and secondly – Skyy Vodka is something exclusive: if you buy it, no women will be able to resist.



Figure 3. The advertisement of Skyy Vodka (1)

Source: Alan Kratz Blogspot, <http://alankratz.blogspot.com/2009/03/scantily-clad-skyy-vodka-ad.html>
[accessed: 18.12.2023].



Figure 4. The advertisement of Skyy Vodka (2)

Source: Magazines, Ads and Books Store, <https://i.ebayimg.com/images/g/vxMAAOSw769hqTtm/s-11600.jpg> [accessed: 9.04.2024].

Some other advertisements which provoked a heated discussion about the boundaries of sexual objectification, which – in its extreme forms – may even become ‘pornification’, started appearing. One of the most illustrative examples might be the Burger King advert that came out in 2009 (Figure 5). For many viewers it might be shocking because of its explicitness and obvious sexual associations. The woman in the foreground is portrayed in profile with her mouth open wide and her eyes crinkled. Her facial expression may suggest sudden amazement, disbelief or even fear connected with the size of this advertised ‘Super Seven Incher’ which can be easily associated with the penis. All the elements of this advertisement (starting with the woman’s face, ending with all of those catchy slogans) bring strong sexual connotations. Sex is used as the good way of selling food items and the woman is treated as the one who will ‘blow’ whatever you wish, not only your mind. In this case the message can be read out explicitly: “Super Seven Incher is as good as (or even better than) fellatio”. The line between sexual objectification and the so-called ‘pornification’ is very thin. There is no wonder that women all around the world may feel offended by this advert as it reduces them to mindless sex toys, always ready to satisfy men.

Interestingly, the advert brought a lot of backlash to Burger King. People criticized it for being extremely sexist and utterly distasteful. Even a model whose face was featured in the advert claimed that the company used the image without her consent and was calling for a boycott of Burger King (www.foxnews.com/food-drink/model-calls-for-a-burger-king-boycott-after-she-was-featured-in-a-sexually-suggestive-ad). The company insisted that they had the rights to use the image as one of many stock photos they had paid for the rights to earlier that year. They also claimed that the advert did not go worldwide as it was created by an independent Burger King franchise in Singapore, Asia. Regardless of the company's explanations, we can all agree that the advert was in very poor taste.



Figure 5. The advertisement of Burger King's BK Super Seven Incher

Source: BurgerPoster Blogspot, <https://burgerposter.blogspot.com/2020/09/burger-king-super-seven-incher-ad.html> [accessed: 13.07.2020].

An Italian designer company, Dolce & Gabbana stunned millions of viewers when the company released this advertisement in 2008 (Figure 6). It was shocking mainly due to its provocative and extremely sexist image (many people even started comparing it a gang rape). The advertisement depicts a scantily clad woman who is 'pinned down' to the ground by a half-naked man, while four other males are standing nearby watching the scene. The image suggests that objectifying women as sexual objects is fully acceptable: men should have all the power and control, both in relationships and in the society. These

concepts and images work to stifle females’ sexuality because it may be a kind of threat to the dominance of males.

This ad for Dolce & Gabbana is supposed to be selling fashion items, as we can judge by looking at the picture – mostly clothes and shoes. The general notion of the image in this ad seems to be very offensive to women. The woman is made to look completely defenceless as her wrists are actually being restrained by the man above her. Even her positioning can express something: she is laying down, while all the males are above her looking down at her, which makes an impression that the woman is subordinate being, lower in the hierarchy than men. She looks extremely vulnerable with her arms above her head and her legs up. All the guys gaze at her as if that was the only reason of her presence here. Her tight clothes uncover most of her attractive body, which is overexposed, whereas the girl’s face is the last thing to be noticed. There is also a clear message in reference to men: every single muscle is emphasized – it makes them look dominant and powerful. This stands in the contrast to the soft and smooth female’s skin, making her look small and delicate. This advertisement sends across many messages, for instance that woman’s role in the society is to be small, vulnerable and helpless. On the contrary, men are supposed to be tough, strong and they are supposed to be the powerful ones and women should just lay down and accept it without batting an eyelid. Surprisingly, at approximately the same time, another popular fashion company – Calvin Klein – released an advert in a very similar tone, also depicting a female model encircled by a group of half-naked men. Both adverts got severely criticized worldwide.



Figure 6. Dolce & Gabbana’s printed advertisement

Source: Fox News, <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/dolce-gabbana-slammed-for-gang-bang-ad>

[accessed: 15.12.2023].

Protein World, a company producing diet shakes and supplements launched its campaign in June 2015 in US. The advert simply could not go unnoticed as the main colour chosen was the brightest possible: a loud canary yellow. In front there is a skinny model who presents a provocative “come and get it ... if you dare” posture – her shoulders and hips back, chest out and head slightly raised in an inviting, yet challenging way. Basically, the ad seems to be attention grabbing, disruptive and sort of unapologetic. The headline “Are you beach body ready?” shocked many people and the whole concept of the advert got lots of backlash worldwide. People accused the company of being sexist and “fat-shaming” for promoting an unrealistic image of women’s bodies. According to Lara O’Reilly (Business Insider, 2015), more than 71,000 signatures were collected under a Change.org petition calling on the company to remove the adverts from the public places. Furthermore, people also organized a small protest in London’s Hyde Park. The ASA¹ received 378 official complaints about the campaign, yet it eventually stated that the ads did not breach the advertising rules on harm, offence or social responsibility.



Figure 7. The advert by Protein World

Source: CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/07/01/protein-worlds-beach-body-ready-ad-not-offensive-watchdog.html> [accessed: 17.12.2023].

It is worth mentioning that in 2016 a New York ad executive, Madonna Badger, launched a campaign against sexism in advertising entitled “We Are Women, Not Objects”. A two-minute clip was posted on YouTube and went viral straight-away (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5J31AT7vigo>). It depicts women sitting in dark rooms and presenting posters with some more controversial adverts, making comments to their content at the same time (for instance, a woman who is holding the infamous Skyy Vodka poster (Figure 4 of this paper) claims “I love sacrificing my dignity for a drink”). The video is short, but really suggestive. The author of the campaign, Madonna Badger, used to work

¹ ASA – The Advertising Standards Authority.

for Calvin Klein and at that time was in charge of publicity and advertising campaigns. In one of the interviews, she admitted that back then she saw nothing wrong with such objectification of women and she didn't realize how improper and how dangerous such commercials could have been. Coming up with her own campaign against such practices was a result of being fed up with women being constantly treated as sexual objects.

Has the way of portraying women in ads changed after #metoo?

October 2017 is the time when the world held its breath with the revelation of numerous sexual-abuse allegations against the influential film producer Harvey Weinstein. As a result, the hashtag #metoo spread virally on social media worldwide. Hollywood actresses such as Alyssa Milano, Jennifer Lawrence, Rose McGowan, Uma Thurman or Gwyneth Paltrow (to name just a few) started talking about their experiences and opened a heated discussion about sexual harassment in film industry. Later on, it spread to other industries and environments where women could have been victims of inappropriate male behaviour. After millions of people started using the phrase, and it spread to numerous languages, the initial purpose of the movement changed and expanded, and as a result, it has come to mean different things to different individuals. More and more representatives of both sexes started being aware of the content they are exposed to in the media. Advertising campaigns that used to objectify women started being openly criticized and this led to a switch in some companies' advertising campaigns. Axe, for instance, changed their approach to making commercials. According to McCoy (Digiday, 2022), the company realized that their target audience changed and hence, the way of advertising had to follow. In their advertisements released between 2018–2023 we mostly find men concentrated on working out at the gym and taking up various sports. The commercials are not focused on half-naked women any longer. If there are some references to man-woman relationships, these are implemented in a very subtle way so as not to offend anyone. Skyy Vodka also avoids depicting either women or men in provocative poses – most of their adverts have become the product-oriented which means that the bottle of vodka's only companions are pieces of fruit served next to ice-cubes on silver plates along with the tiny glasses of drink. Fashion companies such as Dolce & Gabbana or Calvin Klein started promoting bodies of different shapes and sizes. Models are usually fully-clothed and their gestures or postures generally do not bring any sexual associations anymore.

However, does it mean that sexualized content of advertisements disappeared completely? The advertisements presented in this article span the past decade of advertising, and it appears that some brands persist in their depiction of women, despite their professed commitment to women's empowerment. One of the more recent advertisements that were created after #metoo can be found in the UK in form of outdoor billboards.



Figure 8. The ad by Not Just Cooling company

Source: Evening Standard Online, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/air-conditioning-billboard-with-your-wife-is-hot-slogan-sparks-heated-debate-a4196091.html> [accessed: 16.12.2023].

Harriet Brewis (2019) reports that this ad was launched in 2019 by a British company called “Not Just Cooling” that specializes in installing air conditioning systems. It shows an attractive young woman wearing a typical summer outfit: a hat, a white top and shorts. Although the model doesn’t show much of her body naked, the slogan is what really outraged the viewers. It says “Your wife is hot! – Better get the air conditioning fixed”. Plenty of academics considered it sexist, pointing out that according to the ad it’s OK to make nasty comments about women and comment on them as they were in the possession of someone else – “your wife”. Furthermore, it generates harmful gender stereotypes, namely it is the man of the house who is responsible for getting the air conditioning fixed. Interestingly enough, the advert was meant to appear on buses in Nottingham area, but the local company that places adverts on public transport in the city (Adverta) blocked it as “it could cause offence”. However, the ad soon appeared on a billboard at the junction of Woodborough Road and Porchester Road in Mapperley. The company’s owner did not see anything offensive in the advert saying that even his wife, his mother and his mother-in-law approved as it was supposed to be “a little bit of harmless fun”.

The other two more recent examples come from Poland. The one dated back to 2020 and released advertises a diner called “Perełka” (The Pearl). The billboard seen in Figure 9 was located on the way to Gdańsk (this is where the company was located). This particular advert is an example of inserting sexual content where the business does not really need any such connotations. It gives us a zoom on a female’s chest. Although breasts are covered with dry autumn leaves, the caption next to it can be translated as “Hey, see how much our breasts have grown” and followed by the information that “All poultry dishes are now 20% bigger in size”. This is not a very fortunate choice to advertise home-made food.



Figure 9. A billboard advertising a diner in Gdańsk, Poland

Source: Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=530855059172436&set=pb.100067438405427.-2207520000> [accessed: 29.12.2023].

Another example of a desire to boost the service by means of using naked woman is an internet pop-up advert created by a Polish company that buys and sells apples, namely Basstion Fruit. In 2021 they released a pop-up advert that was available as a sponsored marketing content if you browsed certain webpages and its main caption was “We like fifty+” (<https://lubimy50plus.pl>). The advert shows a model with a naked chest whose breasts are covered with small red apples. It took some time to find the company as they just gave us their contact phone number, but if you copy the whole sequence from the picture “Lubimy 50+ małe rozmiary! Kupimy Twoje jabłka” and paste it to your search engine, it can be easily identified.



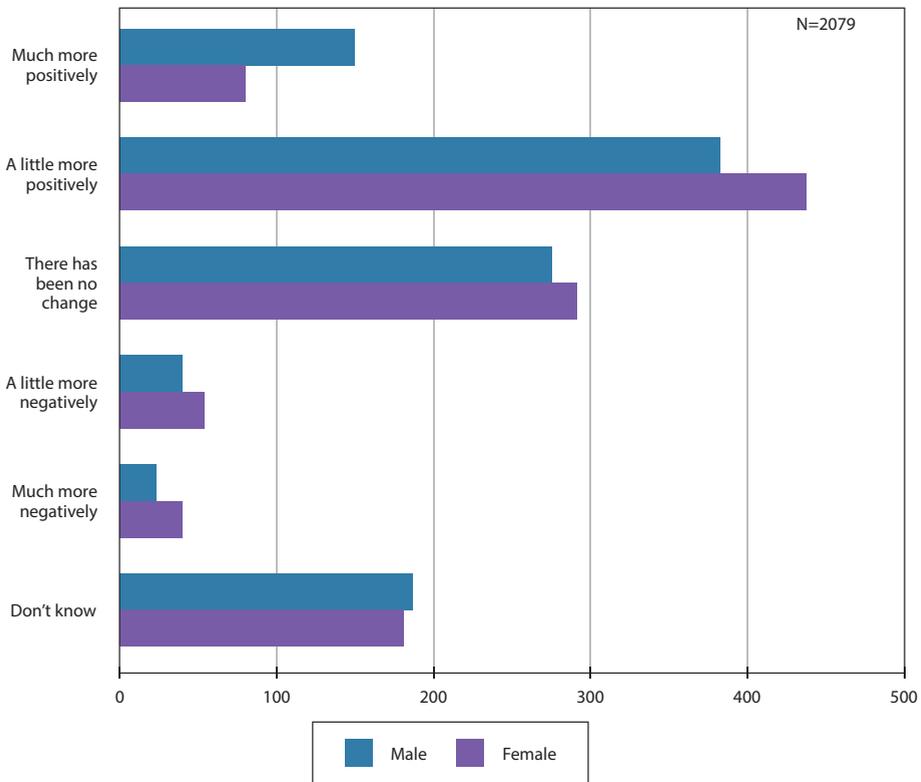
Figure 10. A pop-up ad by a Polish apple retail company, Basstion Fruit
Source: Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=532548215669787&set=pb.100067438405427.-2207520000> [accessed: 30.12.2023],

Do people really see the difference?

A more recent study (Hammett, 2020) on the representation of women in advertising (Figure 13) indicates that approximately 50% of respondents believe women are depicted slightly more positively than five years ago, while only 6% contend that women are being portrayed in a more negative light. Strikingly, more men believe women are represented “much more positively” than women do, whereas women tend to report that the portrayal is either “a little more negative” or “much more negative.” Concerning the objectification of women in advertising, about 38% believe women are less objectified than five years ago, while 12% believe they are more objectified. The majority agree that the situation is “about the same.” In this regard, women tend to hold a less positive view of their portrayal than men. A higher proportion of women than men believe that they are “much more objectified” or “a little more objectified,” while more men contend that women are “much less objectified.” Karen Murawski, research director at YouGov, observes that the survey results indicate that “whatever changes brands have made around the representation of women in their advertising over the past five years, some men and women have interpreted them slightly differently.”

Gender

Change to the representation of women in advertising



Change to the representation of women in advertising

Thinking in general about how women are represented in advertisements... To what extent, if at all, do you think women are represented more positively or negatively in advertising now compared to 5 years ago (i.e. since March 2015), or do you think there has been no change?

Figure 11. A survey conducted by YouGov on the change to the representation of women in advertising

Source: Marketing Week, <https://www.marketingweek.com/international-womens-day-2020-representation-in-advertising/> [accessed: 8.12.2023].

The survey results clearly show that there are indications of slow changes in the way women are portrayed in advertising, but some companies still seem to disregard the criticism that arose from certain sexist ads, such as Protein World’s infamous “Are you beach body ready” campaign. In her 2020 article entitled “Beach bodies, boobs, girl bosses: Have brands got to grips with how to portray women in ads?”, Ellen Hammett notes that many fashion brands, such as Missguided and PrettyLittleThing, continue to display female models wearing fewer clothes, while others perpetuate outdated gender stereotypes (such as People Per Hour) or apologize for their hyper-sexual content (such as KFC Australia).

In January 2021, a make-up remover commercial released by Chinese cotton products manufacturer PurCotton received severe backlash from Chinese women, as reported by Namita Singh (2021, *The Independent*). The ad depicts a young woman being stalked by a man in a black hoodie, and after realizing the danger, she takes out her cleansing wipes and removes her make-up, scaring off the potential offender (<https://cdn.jwplayer.com/previews/wqsWMJke>). The ad was criticized for downplaying the dangers that women face and for suggesting that women are to blame for attracting male attention if they look pretty. Moreover, the content of the ad implies that a woman's likelihood of being harassed is determined by her appearance, reducing her to an object. After the backlash, the company apologized and removed the video from social media. However, the question remains: have major brands finally come to terms with portraying women in a less objectifying way in their ads? It appears that despite the growing criticism, ads that objectify women are still being produced. For instance, in 2017, a Chinese-based Audi commercial (Pham, Dong, 2017) also received significant backlash for depicting a mother who inspects her son's bride's physical appearance thoroughly before allowing the marriage to happen, thereby comparing finding a "proper" wife to buying a vehicle (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiBva8pEgTc&t>). Tiffany Hsu (2019, *New York Times*) claims that although a number of advertising agencies have been trying to improve gender and racial representation in their ad campaigns, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Interestingly, a few women who were interviewed for the article agree that in other areas of life – such as workplaces – women are still treated as inferior beings and men are the ones who often have the final say.

Discussion

At this point it would be reasonable to claim that the choice of advertisements and the interpretations are subjective. Due to the limited scope of this article, I do not discuss the whole aspect of sexual objectification of women, rather a small representative sample. The analysis is focused on the issue of objectification of women. However, it must be said that not only women are sexually objectified in such advertisements. The same can be said about men who are often portrayed as stereotypical males with impressive musculature, strong, tough or even superior beings whose life's ideology is reduced to expensive alcoholic drinks, fast cars and beautiful women. They are presented as those who – when they interact with women – concentrate only on big breasts and long legs. Nevertheless, "certainly not all men sexually objectify women; indeed, many elect not to and are likely to have richer relationships with women as a consequence" (Friedrickson & Roberts, 1997). Hence, such generalization may be unfair. When we go back to "Are you beach body ready?" by Protein World (Figure 7) or "Your wife is hot" advertisement by Not Just Cooling Company (Figure 8), it can be easily noticed that this stereotypical view of men and women is still up-to-date, even in the times of #metoo movement. Adverts appearing to have objectified women have existed for a long time, and although people have increasingly realised how offensive these ads can be, the trend of ignoring women's perspectives in advertising circles doesn't seem to have ended.

Many companies are still convinced that sex sells, but is it still the case? A relatively recent study by Gramazio, Cadinu and Guizzo (2020) shows that it is not. In four experiments the authors asked Italian men and women about how attractive they found particular products and how likely they were to actually purchase them. Participants saw one version of an advertisement that featured a person in a highly sexualized pose, and another version of the same advertisement, with the person removed from the ad by means of Photoshop. Three of the experiments featured female models, while one featured both male and female models. All of the female models were white and thin, while the men were white and muscular. The products ranged from ordinary goods (such as toilet paper) to more luxury goods (that included for instance vodka and perfume). Generally, after viewing sexualized ads, women found products less attractive and were less likely to purchase them compared to their reactions after viewing the neutral ads. The authors attributed these responses in part to the fact that female participants reported experiencing higher levels of negative emotions like anger after viewing the sexy ads compared to the neutral ads. To sum up, the ads made women feel uncomfortable, and that most likely carried over to their impressions of the products. Interestingly enough, ads featuring male models in sexualized poses left women similarly indifferent. Ads featuring sexualized male models were also less appealing to men than neutral ads. At the same time, on the contrary to earlier research that suggested sexy ads featuring women made men more interested in buying products (Wirtz, Sparks, Zimbres, 2017), the study by Gramazio et.al. (2020) found that men were largely unmoved by the level of female sexualization in the ads. It seems that men were no more attracted to the products or likely to buy them than they were after viewing the neutral ads. What is the reason for such changes in men's attitudes? The researchers note that the cultural and advertising landscapes have evolved significantly to include more messages about women's empowerment and body positivity. As a result, it is likely that men (and people in general) could have developed an appreciation for a variety of female and male model ads that goes beyond sexualization.

Conclusions

In recent years, it seems difficult to escape from the range of images that depict unbelievably attractive long-legged females, usually with the company of clean-shaven, muscular males. The type of product does not really matter as it is often located somewhere in the corner of a large photograph, in the centre of which, a half-naked woman bent in a provocative pose encourages us to purchase this particular item. Obviously, nothing has more power than sex which appears to be a very effective advertising tool because the information which is full of sexual connotations refers to our primal instinct – the existence of which we are not always aware.

We cannot deny that nowadays various companies compete with each other in terms of being able to grab the potential customers' attention. That is why they have become more and more creative in producing images or slogans. Knowing that sex sells, different brands have illustrated their adverts with extremely sexualized and controversial images.

Women have been treated as the objects of males sexual fantasy. With their bodies nearly uncovered and their heads frequently ‘cut off’, they got deprived of their personality.

#Metoo movement brought about a change in the way women started to perceive themselves – they became much more aware that their bodies have been used in various media in way that was far from appropriate and they started to learn how to set boundaries. Moreover, the latest magazine articles and research on consumers’ view on the issue of portraying women as objects clearly show that, in the long run, such explicit portrayals mostly lead to a massive boycott and a severe backlash against a given brand that uses such practices.

While discussing sexual objectification and its ramifications, the common view that circulates in the society is that is that men and the media that are to be blamed for the status quo. However, the truth lies somewhere in between. Gill (2009) expresses the view that, in fact, nowadays there are females who freely accept objectification as in many cases they became ‘master of their own fate’ in each and every single area of life. Although such a change of approach is increasingly popular (especially among the younger generation of girls), the author is rather pessimistic about the future implications stating that “the figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject has become the dominant figure for representing young women, part of the construction of the neo-liberal feminine subject” (ibid).

Due to this article’s size constraints, the text provides only a partial insight into the whole spectrum of the problem – it should be considered as a preliminary exploration. In terms of analysis, future studies would benefit from a more extensive selection of images for advertisements. As regards questions connected with the ramifications of such sexual objectifying images and the aforementioned shift from objectification to subjectification, this issue requires much more detailed empirical research conducted on a larger scale using the questionnaires analyzing the consumers’ views on certain portrayals of females in particular advertisements of various products and services.

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Streszczenie

„Co zrobić, żeby niegrzeczni chłopcy się nie pobrudzili” – o seksualizacji kobiet w reklamach przed i po nastaniu ery #metoo

Sposób przedstawiania kobiet w branży reklamowej stanowi temat gorącej debaty od przeszło czterech dekad. Reklamodawcy na całym świecie są konsekwentnie oskarżani o utrwalanie niewłaściwych i poniżających stereotypów kobiet, dotyczących między innymi ich ciał oraz narzucania im przypisanych ról w społeczeństwie zdominowanym przez mężczyzn. Chociaż w ostatnich latach świadomość społeczna na temat takich szkodliwych praktyk wzrasta wraz z pojawieniem się ruchu #metoo, a także dzięki niektórym znanym markom promującym koncepcję wzmocnienia pozycji kobiet – do znaczącego postępu w kierunku przedstawiania kobiet w sposób szanujący ich godność i unikający sprowadzania ich do obiektów seksualnych nadal jeszcze czeka nas długa droga.

Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza reprezentacji kobiet w wybranych reklamach na przestrzeni dwóch minionych dekad oraz próba ustalenia czy – a jeśli tak, to w jaki sposób i w jakim stopniu – w ostatnich latach nastąpiły jakiegokolwiek zmiany w tym aspekcie. Ponadto artykuł ma na celu przedyskutowanie możliwych implikacji seksualizacji we współczesnej reklamie, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem potencjalnego przejścia od uprzedmiotowienia seksualnego do subiektywizacji seksualnej.

Słowa kluczowe: seksualizacja, uprzedmiotowienie kobiet, kobiety w reklamie, stereotypowe przedstawianie kobiet