

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: IMAGES OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Images in advertisements have power to shape our perception on the way we look at the world. Women in ads are often portrayed as sexual objects. Conventional beauty is women's attribute. Unfortunately, the images of women most ads portray are usually the creation of artificiality that establishes an impossible standard of physical perfection for women. This article presents some different ads from some famous women's magazines and discusses some possible meanings the viewers may perceive from the images.

Keywords: images, women, advertisement.

INTRODUCTION

Every day we move through a visual world of advertisements and newspapers, photographs and magazines, cinema and television, websites and internet: an optical empire that is regularly criticized for its power to shape our lives. This visual collage, accompanying us from morning to night, is a product of the giant forces of the contemporary world. The power of the images that these processes have produced is inescapable. They are a part of daily vision, contributing to the way we look at and understand our world.

We continually select images and it is very often the image more than the written text that carries most of the message. Most of us are so accustomed to this world of images that we read most of what we see without much thought. Rutledge (in Fox 1994) wrote that "images not only shape what we know, they affect our behavior as well. They drive us to buy, to vote, to protest, to join, to dislike, to admire, to desire" (p. 206). She also argued that professionals in media business influence people's behavior and perceptions with illusions they create. They distort reality in trying to impress their views upon them.

Kilbourne (1999) noted that advertising is an over \$ 100 billion a year industry and it affects all of us throughout our lives. We are each exposed to over two thousand

ads a day, constituting perhaps the most powerful educational force in society. The ads sell more than products. They sell values, images and concept of success and worth, love and sexuality, popularity and normalcy, addictions. They tell us who we are and who we should be. The success of a work of art, Karl (1994) maintained, “is often judged on the basis of its capacity to create in the mind of the viewer or reader a feeling of plausibility, if not outright believability” (p. 199).

Advertisements have long been recognized of substituting images of desire for the actual products. “Lux” soap ads, for example, do not only sell soap. They sell images of glamor, or popularity, or of sheer celebrity, promising a gratifying association with the likes of Nadia Hutagalung, Tamara Blezinsky, or Bella Saphira, if you will only use “Lux”, the soap of famous stars. By substituting desirable images for concrete needs, modern advertising seeks to transform desire into necessity. In many ads, products were made to appear not only desirable but absolutely necessary. Without them, our very survival as a socially competent being would be in question. Other ads prey on our insecurities and fears. deodorants, for instance, are pitched in such a fashion, playing upon our fear of smelling bad in public.

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS

The aspect of advertising most in need of analysis and change is the portrayal of women. Many critics argue that the roles that women play in the media are demeaning. They are treated, all too often, only as sexual objects, used for display or as dummies who get excited about some brand of cleaning product. They are seldom portrayed as professionals who can be productive and should be taken seriously. Frequently, they are not shown as active, but rather as passive figures who react to the initiatives of others, usually males (Berger, 1999). Conventional beauty is her only attribute. She has no lines of wrinkles, young, no scars, pores or blemishes. She is thin, generally tall and long-legged. All ‘beautiful’ women in ads conform to this norm. Women are constantly exhorted to achieve this ideal, to feel ashamed and guilty if they fail, and to feel that their desirability and lovability are contingent upon physical perfection. A survey of students by *Wall Street Journal* in four Chicago-area schools found that more than half the fourth-grade girls were dieting and three-quarters felt they were over-weight. One student

commented, “We don’t expect boys to be handsome. We take them as they are.” Another added, “But boys expect girls to be perfect and beautiful. And skinny” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 179).

WOMEN ARE MARKED

An old saying says that women are to be seen not heard. Imagine we are going to a gathering in a conference where women and men are present. Most of the women could be marked by their hair styles, clothing, makeup and accessories, and each of them carries meaning. Men, however, are mostly unmarked. Their hair is in standard length and styles. They wear dark pants and shirts of lighter colors. Yet there is no women’s hair styles that can be called standard, that says nothing about her. A woman whose hair has no particular style is perceived as not caring about how she looks. Women must also choose their shoes, flat, laced shoes, or high heels. A tight and sexy clothing of a woman sends a message, i.e. she wants to be attractive and possibly still available. There are thousands of cosmetic products from which women can choose and try ways of applying them. No wonder women are always the targets of advertisements. Women’s magazines are sold more than magazines about men. There are no men’s beauty and glamour magazines with circulations even approaching those of the women’s magazines. The idea of men’s beauty magazines may sound odd. Men who are concerned overtly with their appearance can be considered effeminate, not ‘real men.’

Unfortunately, the images of women most ads portray are usually the creation of artificiality that establishes an impossible standard of physical perfection for women. Beauty is something that comes from without and women are willing to spend money and time on cosmetics. When they cannot conform to an ideal and impossible standard, they go to great length of effort to manipulate and change their faces and bodies. A woman seems to have been conditioned to view her face as a mask and her body as an object. She is in constant need of alteration, improvement, and disguise. She is made to feel dissatisfied with and ashamed of herself. Growing older is a taboo. Women are encouraged to remain like girls, never to mature, but be passive and dependent.

BARBIE AS THE IMAGE OF AN IDEAL WOMAN

It is true that recently there have been some changes in the images of women. For instance Barbie, a famous American doll which almost every girl in the United States knows and has been introduced and sold in many other countries including Indonesia, has undergone some changes. Barbie, who was designed by a man, first had her breasts large and out of proportion to the rest of her body. Her body has convinced millions of girls and women that her bust and waist are the epitome of lovability. It establishes an impossible standard of physical perfection for girls and women that no real woman can possibly achieve. Some critics blame Mattel, the company which produces Barbie, for contributing to a social climate that overemphasizes looks at the expense of women's other qualities.

Later, Mattel signed up Barbie for an extraordinary round of plastic surgery. Her breasts were reduced, her waist was enlarged, and her face was changed just a bit to produce a more 'realistic' ideal. Borger (2000) maintained, however, that despite the changes, we have missed a more important point: It is not Barbie's figure that is the big problem. It is her values. Her outfits are groomed to appeal to those upwardly mobile baby boomer mothers who thought Barbie looked too cheap for their children. Barbie, who was first dressed up more like a middle class woman, is now wearing her clothes from the likes of Christian Dior or Ralph Lauren. Barbie has become a snob. Hence, what we are getting is : You're never too young to become an elitist (p.40).

Indeed, there has been another change in the images of women. A 'new woman' has emerged in commercials in recent years. She is generally presented as superwoman, who manages to do all the work at home and on the job, or as a liberated woman, who owes her independence and self-esteem to the products she uses. Kilbourne (1999) believed that "these new images do not represent any real progress but rather create a myth of progress, an illusion that reduces complex sociopolitical problems to mundane personal ones. Advertising images do not cause these problems, but they contribute to them by creating a climate in which the marketing of women's bodies ... is seen as acceptable" (p. 180).

THE IMAGES AND THE MEANINGS

Here are a few ads we can see in some famous women magazines such as “Femina,” “Kartini,” or “Metropolitan” where most of their ads are directed towards women. The first picture is an ad on women’s cosmetics. This ad on women’s cosmetics contained striking photograph and suggestive image. We can see an extreme close-up of a young woman’s face. The face itself is divided into two. The right side of her face shows the woman’s face after using the advertised products while the left side of her face shows her former condition of her face before the products were applied.



In a glance the viewers may not find the left side of her face as having any blemish, but three suggestive words are attached: *kulit berkerut*, *kulit bernoda*, *kulit kering* (wrinkled, spotted and dry skin). The words above the picture stress a solution for the problems: *SOLUSI mengatasi apapun masalah kecantikan kulit anda dengan rangkaian produk yang alami, aman namun efektif* (SOLUSI overcomes any of your skin problem with its natural, safe, but effective products.)

The intentional meaning evoked by this image in the ad can be:

1. Wrinkled, spotted, and dry skin should be women’s problems. A beautiful woman should make them as her enemies that she needs to get rid of. This ad has taken the advantage of women’s fears and anxieties of having wrinkled, spotted and dry skin, and shown to the viewers how the products can solve women’s problems.

2. Wrinkled and dry skin usually belongs to old women and being old for women means losing their attractiveness and beauty. Dry skin is uninteresting and infertile like old women's skin. Being old should be postponed or even avoided as far as they can. Of course it can only be achieved through the use of the advertised products. The result of using them will make a woman look young.
3. These products are also sold as a kind of indulgence for women. The hints of natural, safe, and effective are strong selling points for beauty aids. Again, it takes the advantage of our fear of using chemical products that are usually unsafe and therefore ineffective. Meanwhile what is natural is good and the products can offer natural beauty for women.
4. The image of the young woman can be seen as looking directly to the viewer. In a study of visual design, Kress et.al (in Kilbourne, 1999) describe the position of the subject in an image looking directly at the viewer as comprising a demand. The gaze demands something from the viewer. It demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with her. Here the image seductively pout at the viewer and as if asking the viewer to desire her look.
5. The use of two different types of face, before and after the products are applied, can be seen as selling magic. The change of wrinkled, spotted and dry skin into smooth, light, and youthful skin is like magic. And magic is mere illusion. It is not real, yet people are fascinated about it and it forces us to believe it as real.

The next ad is an ad of jewelry products.



An image of a young woman and a man is used to show the necessity of using the product. However, the image itself has depicted more about gender image than the extentional meaning, i.e. the use of Joensin jewelry.

1. The words *Setiap pilihan adalah sangat pribadi* [Every choice is a very private choice] show dual meanings: First, the choice of showing and most possibly giving the Joensin jewelry to the

young woman should be a private choice. It should have been a piece of jewelry which is personally chosen to be given to the woman. Second, the choice could also refer to the man's choice of the young woman as a special person who deserves the special gift. Hence, the woman is specially chosen by the man.

2. Look at the woman's face. Her astonishing face and her smile while looking at the piece of jewelry as if to say that she is very pleased to be given such a gift. Perhaps she did not even imagine that she would get such a special gift. Hence, the ideas of a woman being chosen and given should be taken with pleasure and gratitude. Here the woman is therefore depicted as a passive woman, to be chosen by man and is in need of man's special attention.
3. Such a woman deserves high fashion jewelry like the Italian white gold or diamond wedding rings. Hence, being passive for a woman is gold. It is the kind of character an ideal woman should display, especially in her relation to a man.
4. Look at the man's face and his smile when looking at the woman. He is as if saying "I have chosen you and as a token of gratitude, I have chosen this piece of jewelry for you." Again, the message is clear: woman is to be chosen not to choose.

The last ad to be discussed here is a series of the pictures of women who can be categorized as *cerdas*, *ceria*, *cantik* [intelligent, cheerful, beautiful]. This page is provided by "Femina" magazine prior to the selection of women of 'Cita Cinta.' It shows the kinds of women who can be considered as *cerdas*, *ceria*, *cantik*.

The page contains eight pictures of young women with their actions and gestures which depict their characteristics:

1. *Saya percaya diri*. [I am confident.]
2. *Saya aktif dan kreatif*. [I am active and creative.]
3. *Saya cinta kehidupan*. [I love life.]
4. *Saya cinta kebebasan*. [I love freedom.]
5. *Saya mempesona*. [I am attractive.]
6. *Saya ceria*. [I am cheerful.]
7. *Saya menghargai tradisi*. [I appreciate tradition.]
8. *Saya penuh ambisi*. [I am very ambitious.]



Apparently they are all pictures of young women. Hence, they give the viewers impression that in order to be intelligent, cheerful and pretty, women have to look young, slim and sexy, rich, educated, and lovable. There is no place for an old, poor, fat, or uneducated woman to be included here. Such image has shaped the viewers's mind with ideas of what it is to be an ideal woman. It is no longer the words that they will remember the most, but the image of a woman driving a car, using a cellular phone, walking with uplifted face and carrying a case, relaxing, or being embraced by a man.

Many women internalize these stereotypes and shape their mind with what they should look in order to be considered as an ideal woman. Advertisers use special technique to create 'reality effects' from the unreality. But women grow up thinking they need to look like the women in the ads, which for most women is impossible. No matter how carefully they apply these products, they will never look like the pretty women depicted in the ads. Perhaps the reason why they become so obsessed with trying to look like the woman in the ads is because that is the kind of woman who is acceptable by her society, and especially by men.

The success of modern advertising reflects a culture that has chosen illusion over reality. With the advancement in visual designs, we cannot expect any truly realistic ads in the future. Yet, women are often unaware of the beast behind the beautiful faces. Illusion has been taken as reality. Hence, most women would always think their appearance is never good enough no matter how attractive a woman may appear to be to others.

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