Sex In Advertising Essay, Research Paper

Sex in Advertising

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The use of sex in advertising has become a major selling method in the

society we live in today. It began sixty years ago when a beautiful young woman

introduced the first windproof lighter and a new wave of advertising emerged -

The Pinup Girl. She advertised everything from lighters to laundry soap. She

even recruited for the U.S. armed forces (Parade Magazine; pg 6). Sexuality in

advertising is now a major area of ethical concern, though surprisingly little

is known about its effects or the norms for it’s use (Baltimore Sun; pg. 1G).

Advertisers use of sex appeals has grown and become widely present throughout

the U.S. and really most of the world, but it has never really been clear the

line between offensive and effective advertising. Over the last couple of years,

commercial content, like programming, has gone through a significant maturing

process. Sex has become a driving force. NBC’s vice president for advertising

standards, Rick Gitter, acknowledged that the 1990’s reality can’t be denied

(Baltimore Sun; pg. 1G).

Ann Klein’s company’s ads are some of the most striking ads that are

carried in the main stream media. They have received only a few negative

letters, but they’ve drawn a huge amount of attention (Baltimore Sun; pg. 2G).

“We wanted the women to say, ‘Hey,’ and we have gotten a fantastic response,”

there’s a fine line between doing something new, different and interesting, and

angering your customer with offensive commercials that spoil their commercial

intent. An Ann Klein spot that showed a man kissing a woman and beginning to

unbutton her shirt, was not allowed to air by wary network censors, recalled

company vice president Nancy Lueck (Baltimore Sun; pg 2G). Calvin Klein, an

American clothing manufacturer that courts the glamorous young, drew great

disgrace and shame earlier this year for some particutlarly gamine youth who

lolled about wearing their underpants in a recent campaign, which the network

censors also withdrew (The Economist pg. 53). “Sexiness, as a component of the

good life, is a staple for advertisers ; Coca Cola decorated its drug store

posters at the turn of the century with beautiful young women whom male drinkers

might hope to date and female drinkers might emulate (The Economist pg. 54).”

One has only to pick up any issue of a fashion magazine and page after page is

filled with advertisements attempting to correlate sex and beauty with the

purchase of their products.

The current flood of sex in advertising is often promoted in terms of

fulfilling erotic fantasies and appetites (D’Emilio and Freeman, 1989).

Consumers want to see more, however the use of such appeals is constantly

contested in terms of ethics and morality, much as sexual norms and morals in

general have been contested throughout both American and world history (The

Journal of Advertising, pg 73). Commercials have become a risque as standards

loosen. Networks, in an effort to compete with cable television, have relaxed

thier censorship standards. Advertising standards have always been defined by

the public’s tolerance and the shifting moods of courts and government agencies.

Even though there are concerns about sex and advertising on the air, on

billboards, and in print, it is more accepted now than ever before. However,

ads dealing with the environment or nutrition are coming under much stricter

contraints. The public has become less sensitive to sexy ads, but increasingly

irate about claims involving food and Mother Earth. “While we will tolerate an

expansion in areas that may offend our prurient interest, we are not prepared to

do that with products that effect our quality of life” said Stuart Lee Friedel,

an attorney with the New York based law firm of Davis & Gilbert, who specializes

in advertising (Baltimore Sun, pg 2G).

Advertisers are helping to fuel an unhealthy obsession. “Women’s

dissatisfaction with their bodies is considerably more prevalent now than a

generation ago. “Ours is now a society that is increasingly preoccupied with

appearance and weight,” says Judith Robin,Ph.D., former chairman of the

psychology department at Yale University, currently president of the University

of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and a recognized authority on body image.

Magazine covers, TV shows, music videos and movies tend to feature very thin

women over those with more realistically filled-out figures. Advertisers want

people to feel dissatisfied with our current appearances, so they will be more

inclined to purchase their products that offer improvements. ” The media now

exposes us to this single ‘right look’, and the beauty industry promises that

anyone can attain it,” writes Dr.Robin, who is also the author of Body Traps:

Breaking the Binds That Keep You from Feeling Good about Your Body (Food And

You; pg. 33). Shame often hinders would be gym goers for fear of embarrassment.

Health club advertisers often showcase scantily clad, sculptured bodies working

out. Over weight people find it difficult to picture themselves beside those

people – the invariably young and trim (Atlanta journal/Constitution; pg. G3).

Advertisers for car makers appeal to the male population by insinuating that a

man is judged by the power behind his wheels therefore, big strong men drive big

strong trucks, and how he handles the road, with his powerful new wheels, will

have a positive influence on his masculinity (Essence, pg 93). The back pages of

magazines are flooded with ads for sex toys designed to enhance your sex life.

Vitamins claiming to give you more stamina and lingerie worn by beautiful

voluptuous models whose assets do not come with the product. Still, the

advertisers hope to convey the subtle message that if you buy their product

you’ll achieve those results. Purfume manufactuers advertise their products

will attract the opposite sex, mask body odor and invite more itimate touch (

ADCULT USA, pg144). Once even routine ads for some practical, everday items

were shunned. “Hygiene products, deodorants, laxatives… and simular products

are generally not accepted, ” the NBC code of 1943 noted. Today women can

model lingerie or even breast feed a child (as seen in a Gerber ad) on

television. Consider a much noted A Calvin Klein ad insert in New York and Los

Angeles editions of Vanity Fair, was described by Advertising Age as “boy meets

girl, boy meets boy, boy meet self”. That’s merely the most striking example of

a vast range of jeans, lingerie and cosmetics ads that once would have been

relegated to Playboy or Penthouse, but now are appearing in upscale mainstream

publications ( Baltimore Sun, pg 3g).

Toy manufacturers are also capitalizing on the use of sex to sell

products. Video games, which have a largley teenage male following, use graphic

and sexually stimulating graphics to portray their female characters. Lude

advertisements such as “Engage in thousands of exciting relationships with total

strangers without wearing anything made of latex” (NEXT Generation, pg 72), and

“Sometimes having a killer body just isn’t enough, you’ll need tough studs and

big bolts” (NEXT Generation, pg 91) appeal to their adolescent fantasies.

There are people who consider this form of advertisment to be in poor taste

because of the advertising techniques. They oppose advertisements with sexual

overtones and advertisements with adult content that appear in media available

to and directed toward children (Advertising, pg 67). Even the foreign market

of developing countries such as war torn Cambodia are being flooded with the

promise of the good life. Beer commercials in Cambodia show fit young men

leaping and sprinting while promises of physical and intellectual prowess flash

on the television screen. In one popular spot, a man cracks an egg into his

beer, and the yoke transforms into a woman, he drinks down the attractive brew

with a slurp ( Yahoo! News, yahoo.com/headlines/961129).

The Spanish government introduced legislation in April, 1986 to ban

misleading, unfair, or irrational advertising. The bill would also regulate the

use of testimonials, comparative advertising, and the material that is offensive

to the dignity of women or fails to respect the rights of children. ( Edward

Mark Mazze, Britannica Annual 1989, pg 265). The United States has no such

legislation, except for strict laws against child pornography. An attempt to

introduce such legislation would be met with stern opposition from the corporate

world, whose industries profit from such advertising. Advertising agencies have

taken advantage of the freedoms of speech and expression guaranteed by the

Constitution. Product advertising continues to push the acceptance of sexually

explicit materials to the limit in it’s race for higher profits. Sexuality has

become a national trade mark, the symbol of American commerce. Naked, semi-

naked, dressing and undressing women fill not only films but the pages of

magazines advertising food, clothing, automobiles, hotels, refrigerators,

chewing gum and everything which in the opinion of the business man would

represent the vital interest of people. Advertisements have never been granted

the unqualified rights of free speech held by books, articles or news programs.

The indecency of American and world wide advertising has become indescribable.

Sex in advertising will always be an issue of ethical concern as long as peoples

view remain diverse and companies profit from those diversities.

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