Women In Advertising Essay, Research Paper

The Oppression of Females in Advertising in our society is a complex collection of institutions, status, roles, values, and norms, and the best way to understand and learn about them is through the use of cultural artifacts. These can be anything from music to art to literature, or as in the example of this discussion, the modern day creation of advertisement in mass media. As Homo Sapiens moved from the hunter – gatherer way of life to industrial society, it was necessary to construct a framework for living so that such a concentrated number of people could exist together. This framework as come to consist of a myriad of expectations based on values and norms in the form of roles status and institutions. Desirable behavior is sought by people throughout the country based on how one is brought up and the expectations one is bombarded with on a daily basis. These expectations are reflected in every part of our culture and are used by people so as to know how to act in any given situation. The main examples are the family, education, health and medicine, religion, and the law. I have found that certain mediums reflect the expected roles in these institutions better than others. I originally focused on gender roles as a depiction of stereotypical behavior as reflected by advertising especially the portrayal of women, but I discovered that there were other stereotypes being perpetuated as well that were just as institutionalized if not just simply less noticed or studied. Therefore, although this argument will focus on the depiction of females and the female role in advertising. It will also mention the general use of American values, norms, and institutions to influence consumer.

An institution is defined as “a stable cluster of values, norms, status, roles, and groups that develop around a basic social need” with a status being a person’s position in society and a role being the behavior expected from that, and a value being a socially shared idea of what is good, right, and desirable and a norm being the behavior expected from those ideas. When people begin to form certain expectations in life there begin to be formed stereotypes. People recognize them universally and use them to form opinions and act or not act in a certain way when they are confronted with a situation or person. It is “human nature” to fear the unknown and cling to the familiar, and desire to fit in but want to stand out at the same time. It is from here that advertising finds its most potent weapons. By focusing on these culturally formed stereotypes they can explicitly affect people, and by feeding on these implicitly realized characteristics of people they can also affect behavior . This seems relatively harmless to the advertiser who simply wants to sell his product, but it becomes harmful when it begins to perpetuate certain undesirable stereotypes to the point of cementing them in impressionable minds. Thus I will further differentiate the discussion presented here into the use of institutions that I do not find as harmful as others.

Understanding that the perpetuation of any stereotype is bad in that it robs people of the chance to form original opinions without the hindrance of preconceived notions, but I strongly feel that specific depiction’s like that of “the myth of women” need to be eradicated first and foremost because of its direct halt of progress. That’s not to say that advertising has not changed somewhat with the changing of women’s roles and opportunities in the 1990’s. Society ,and specifically men, can accept the need and desire for women to work outside the home, but they still expect them to be mothers who keep everything together in the home. The portrayal of women can be broken down into several categories. First is the idea of beauty. Generally about 85% of all advertisements are devoted to the beautification of women’s hair, face, and body. Women are bombarded with airbrushed, perfectly lit, constantly happy shots of gorgeous models that portray every ideal of our society. The content of ads that I have obsereved over and over again were makeup, perfume, breast centered, and skin.

Women are not expected to be presentable without the help of the latest chemical technique to remove blemishes, darken eyes, lengthen lashes, coat the lips, clean their hair, and remove shine. Regardless of one’s natural features, they will never be good enough without these alterations. The company that promotes this attitude the best was Maybelline: “maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s Maybelline” is their prime slogan. Some women have LIPS as SMOOTH as they talk. So SUPPLE so luscious they make anything sound fascinating. Gift of nature? Get real” The quotes could go on, but I think the message is clear; one could never be naturally attractive to society without the help of makeup and their advertisements lead to this sub conscious understanding.

Next is the depiction of perfumes. The basic concepts behind perfume ads are of sex, intimacy, exotic drugs, and escape from reality. Without the use of perfume one could never attract a man. By portraying the scents as some sort of exotic reward they seem to insinuate that one will be completely irresistible. Names such as: Candy, Obsession, Poison, etc. . . are typical examples. Then there are those examples utilizing a different but no less potent theme as with the perfume Escape. These ads target the less wild side of women and depict the beautiful serene young bride in an affluent house, often with a small child gazing admiringly at her. No base human desire is left unexplored in this industry.

Then there are the actual models. These women break the school girl norm that the average women was brought up holding true. The models reveal a plethora of flesh not accepted as norm within this society, and still t

This leads into the last thing that needs to be discussed. The portrayal of beauty and supposed desirable behavior depicted in everyday advertisements is not only unrealistic but almost virtually unattainable. The models are women of exceptional good looks that are obviously not the average American female; they have been painted, sprayed , teased , lighted, angled, and touched up to give the perfect image, and it is ridiculous for females to feel like failures if they do not look similar. But many do. I feel that this is where the societal tragedies associated with eating disorders, silicone breast implants, cosmetic surgery, etc. . . stem from. Eating disorders are exceptionally high in young females. Constantly showering women with a desirable image that they cannot hope to attain is unfair, wrong and irresponsible of corporations.

Next is the concept of women as objects. Within the courses that I have taken, there has been the theme of women as mysterious, unknown creatures associated more with nature than man, who is considered associated with culture. This can be put in the category of the implicit almost subconscious themes in advertising. The depiction of women on pedestals, frozen in time and space, untouchable, is very common. Women are also often associated with wild animals, exotic scenes and far away places, putting them in the same out – of – reach, mysterious category. This once again is forming a myth and stereotype in society around women that preys on the human fear of the unknown. This only hinders the female’s struggle for equality.

The final concept that I observed was that of tokenism. The working women of the 90’s is becoming more and more accepted , but advertisements still cannot seem to divorce themselves from the concept that the work place is just another medium in which their consumers can display themselves. They feel obligated to include the token women in work place environments who seem to enjoy modeling the latest style of working clothes, like one ad I saw which was selling the great little office dress. Little being the operative word in that sentence. They promote the importance of not conforming to a man’s world by dressing like a man and the necessity to maintain a feminine image, yet the image they depict as desirable is one of short skirts, sleeveless tops, and high slits up the front and back.

The advertisements that were not utilizing gender stereotypes seemed to fall into any of the following categories. First is the values surrounding the home, the family, children, the elderly, and what ever else in normally included with those ideas. Second is the use of patriotism, and the good ol’ all-American life. Somewhat included in this previous idea is the use of “reality” as meaning every day hardships, problems, “facts-of -life” as an attention grabber. Another depiction is that of the dismissal of biology, especially in the avoidance of aging, illness or unhappiness. Examples of advertisers exploiting these values and institutions abound throughout the images. The use of children, young animals (like puppies), and smiling elderly people are often used to evoke the nurturing response in viewers. Certain social values and feelings surround these subjects and are quite useful in eliciting attention from the observer which in turn can present great profits. For some reason the shot of a beautiful women holding a puppy can give the double image of sexuality and nurturance at the same time, appealing to both types of men. The favorite tactic of liquor and food commercials is that of the family and good friends. Everyone is always having the best time when they are drinking or smoking in an advertisement, giving the impression that happiness is much more attainable with these products. Exploiting the vision of good friends and family gathered together with soft lighting and fuzzy homey decorations is a common technique of companies like Stouffers, and Betty Crocker.

An interesting theme that I think is also just a typical American value , is the desire to deny the biology of human beings and the extent to which it pervades our lives. This goes hand in hand with the concept of unattainable beauty, but it also goes further. This concept can be seen exemplified in all the anti- aging advertisements, as well as the ads for weight loss centers, cellulite creams and various vibrating machine and suckers, quick tanning lotions, and the general habit of portraying everyone as young, healthy, and physically fit. This is simply ignoring the facts of reality. An excellent example is the Oil of Olay advertisements: “some people grow old gracefully, I intend to fight it every step of the way” Not only is this not natural, I feel that this is perpetuating the younger generations to shun and neglect of the elderly in our society. In most cultures around the world elderly people are revered for their knowledge and experiences in life, and they are taken good care of by their children and the whole society. But Americans are so stuck on the eternal youth and never losing one’s looks, that being old is often seen as simply out of shape, senile, and ugly. This concept goes along completely with the advertisers entire avoidance of reality. NIKE athletic apparel advertisements are one of the few that utilizes reality to get they point across and does it well. It is almost as if it is necessary to shock the viewer into paying attention. They prefer to use harsher realities to grab the eye, but they also make it a point to have a constant ethnic blend in all their ads, thus supporting the theme of their company.

The reality is that America is not just all white beautiful , young, healthy, in shape ,well – off people running around with no care except the latest fashion trends. The reality is, is that no matter how many self help ads you see, chances are you won’t be like them. People take this to mean that they are failures, and here we find the breeding grounds for the psychological problems that plague our society, not to mention quite a few health problems as well. Smoking Marlboro cigarettes is not going to make you a rough, tough, strong, macho man, it’s going to give you lung cancer. Marlboro does not advertise with the original Marlboro man because he is attached to a respirator after the onset of emphysema.

Therefore, there are several arguments I make in this paper on advertisement. First is that no matter how liberal and advanced we feel our modern day America has come, it is obvious that our values and institutions are still being controlled by old-fashioned notions. There is a conservative trend going on in America, and underneath the token attempts at change, the old stereotypes are hard at work; at work molding minds and opinions in every day situations that are not needed in our close-minded culture. Some of the hypocrisy is blatant, and other is not so noticeable. The final message is a reiteration of the concept of avoiding reality. The purpose of this paper is to argue that the influential powers of advertisements are more suppressive of women that the advertising companies would admit to. America is riddled with stereotypes and the perpetuation of them through distortions of institutions, roles, status, and norms into advertisements molding the average female American. If one stops to consider the impressionability of the human mind, especially the young ones. It becomes frightening to think that these blatant stereotypical depiction’s can be picked up in most living rooms in this country. Of course I believe that people should be allowed to formulate their own opinions and have the freedom to watch and promote whatever they choose, but I feel that the people developing these advertisements should act with a little more responsibility towards society and pay more attention to what they are broadcasting on the public owned electro magnetic spectrum. An advertiser would argue many of the points previously stated. They do not agree that there are oppressive undertones present within their advertisements. They also contend that they do not force women to confine them selves to the norms depicted with in their advertisements. However I believe that since these companies have power they should take on more of the responsibilities of having that power. I feel it is a moral obligation for the companies not to degrade their consumers. Additionally many may argue that since I am a male, I am unable to accurately depict how these advertisements affect females. I am also unable to accurately state the arguments of my opposition, for they deny the argument even exists. That is until they find a way to make the argument profitable.