

Promoting Prejudices: Stereotyped Depictions of Women in Ads

By Audrey Lee

A woman stares sideways into the camera, teeth clenched, while the rest of her face remains strangely relaxed. Her eyes are engulfed by black smudges of makeup resulting in a deadly appearance. A man holds her face by the jaw line. Their bare necks and faces reflect a faint glow, while the background consists of an eerie, empty, black. The man's eyes are closed as he kisses the woman's cheek and burrows his nose into her skin. The woman however, is disengaged - her cadaverous eyes express either fear or nothing at all, and she is turned away from the man. This close-up is the advertisement for Gucci's new fragrance for women, Guilty, in the September 2010 issue of *Vogue* magazine.

Another advertisement, in the *Elle Brazil* November 2010 issue, features a waif-like model in a frilly, white mini dress and white heels covered with hearts leaning against a yellow school bus. The reflection of a red brick building on the school bus's doors suggests it's parked in front of a primary school. Her left hand barely holds onto the bus's side, while her right hand caresses her upper thigh, directly below the dress's hemline. She poses in a bashful knee bend, her face in a cant position. Her wide eyes stare blankly upward as the rest of her face remains neutral. These two images serve as prime examples of the pervasive trend in the advertisement industry to sexually objectify, victimize and infantilize women. These archetypal portrayals of women reinforce and validate existing stereotypes of subordination and gender roles, encroaching into real lives.

Sociologist Erving Goffman's celebrated work, *Gender Advertisement* (1979), looks into how "advertisements depicts for us not necessarily how we actually behave as men and women

but how we *think* men and women behave” (Goffman). The reason Goffman’s study has had so much influence, and been revisited by many sociologists, is that unlike other feminist views that concentrate on obvious half-naked bodies, he focuses on the subtleties. His research shows how “hands, eyes, knees; facial expressions, head postures, relative sizes; positioning and placing, head-eye aversion, finger biting and sucking,” (Gornick) all associate women with childish acts. Under headings like “The Feminine Touch,” “The Ritualization of Subordination,” and “Licensed Withdrawal,” Goffman categorizes his observations. In “The Feminine Touch,” a woman’s hands barely touch, hold or caress – never grasp, manipulate, or shape (Gornick). “The Ritualization of Subordination,” and “Licensed Withdrawal” –which often overlap – are evident when the eye or head of a woman is averted. It is always in relation to whatever *man* is pictured with her. Women are shown mentally drifting from the scene while in close contact with a male, their faces lost and dreamy, “as though his aliveness to the surroundings and his readiness to cope were enough for the both of them” (Gornick).

Goffman emphasizes the connection between the “depicted femininity” in advertisements and the behavior of children, who are dependent on adults from their realities. To further drive home the unnaturalness of said shown behaviors, he challenges readers to imagine the advertisements with the sexes switched. This switch reveals the unnaturalness of the “natural” pictures.

The woman in Gucci’s Guilty advertisement illustrates two of Goffman’s phenomena, “Licensed Withdrawal” and “Ritualization of Subordination,” which identify her as a victim and sexual object. “Licensed Withdrawal” is evident in the disengagement by the woman with the man, demonstrated in her lack of eye contact and expression of removal from the situation. In addition to this mental disconnect that leaves her vulnerable, the man has complete control of the

woman as his hand cups her cant neck while positioned on top of her. The relative position and his figuratively holding her life in his hand further vindicates his command and emphasize her subordinate status. The man's evident passion connects him to reality and his surroundings, while the woman, who seems unaware even of his necking her, demonstrates physical disconnectedness. Her clenched teeth could suggest pleasure, but her other neutral facial features and black-circled eyes serve as stronger indicators of a "Licensed Withdrawal." This portrayal of a man taking control of the situation while woman simply allows it to occur affects not only women's images of themselves, but also men's understanding of their "leading" role in relationships. Most who browse through fashion magazines will find nothing wrong with this image. They may even see the woman with control, as she's the one who feels "Guilty" for seducing this poor man. However, the application of Goffman's theories reveals the true nature on this unnatural depiction of men and women, a depiction society has been trained to *think* of as natural.

The *Elle Brazil* advertisement draws upon two other prevalent, classic body movements of women in advertising: as Goffman labels them, "The Feminine Touch," and the "bashful knee bend". In either depiction, women are dependent on a "loving protector [to provide] relief from the necessities and constraints to which adults in social situations are subject (Goffman). The woman uses the non-utilitarian, feminine touch as the tips of her two middles fingers grace her upper thigh, while the other hand is tucked behind her, just barely holding onto the side of the school bus for support. The light tracing of her own body relays an understanding that her body is a precious thing, to be dealt with delicately (Goffman, 1979). With the delicacy of her hands comes frailty, "initiat[ing] a sign of helplessness and need" (Goffman). She displays the "bashful knee bend," where both knees are bent; one leg half-twisted off to the side. In a dangerous

situation, this is a prime position when needing to flee. The prime posture for fleeing presupposes the goodwill of anyone in her surroundings, and suggests, like a child, she is staying “within view – scamper-back distance,” maximizing her ability to run to the nearest adult figure.

The woman’s vulnerability and child-like qualities are exploited further in her attire and physical movements. She wears white, a color associated with innocence and purity. Her loose fitting dress highlights her wan, flat-chested body. The heart covered white heels also seem childish for a woman in her twenties. She poses like a child, with her head turned upward, her big eyes conveying a lost, unawareness of her surroundings; this awkward pose further infantilizes her. Her disoriented look reads as an acceptance of her powerlessness and subordination. Children need not be aware or engaged in their surroundings, as their lack of maturity and ignorance “provides an adult the right and even an obligation to offer help” (Goffman).

Since Kate Moss entered the modeling industry in the 90’s, womanly bombshell models were replaced by rail-thin, boxy models similar to Moss’s body type, now dominating the fashion scene. This model, Carolina Trentini is part of the generation of “baby doll-like” models (also referred to as “the Lolita models”). These models are known for their wide-set eyes, large foreheads, and pre-pubescent bodies (Wang, 2010). The advertisement exploits Trentini’s physical characteristics to emphasize vulnerability. Trentini is an adult, but the conflicting portrayal of her as an infantile school girl overpowers her womanhood, preventing her from being taken seriously or credibly. Women’s continuous portrayal as children – who need care, instruction, and protection provided by adults – ritualizes existing stereotypes of both the subordination and the vulnerability of women.

Since Goffman's research took place in 1979 – three decades ago – society has witnessed abounding progress in women's equality, especially during the third wave of feminism's expansion of women in politics (Orr). One would expect advertisements to reflect this progress. Unfortunately, the research of many sociologists – Balknap in 1991, Jones in 1991, Kang in 1997, and Lawton in 2009 – shows little has changed. Each combed through magazine advertisements; some extended the research further in order to adapt to current situations. Eric Lawton's 2009 Senior Capstone Project reveals advertisements' permeation into society by studying the similarity in body language of men and women in Facebook photographs. One of Goffman's categories prevalent in the Facebook photographs surveyed by Lawton was the female head or eye aversion in relation to men. When women lean into kiss men, the men remain looking at the camera with changing expressions, while the women stick to a serious expression. Women in my own Facebook pages often hold objects, and/ or caress their own bodies in unnatural ways, especially in default pictures.

Lookbook.nu, a blog that advertises itself as “the internet's largest source of fashion inspiration from real people around the world,” serves as better evidence than Facebook to demonstrate real people's emulation of advertisements. The site streams pages of self-taken photographs posts by popularity. Images and poses from the bashful knee bend, unnatural caresses of the face, and blank, innocent stares to the self-subordination of lying on beds or floors are evident in almost every photograph. On countless blogs like Lookbook.nu (Luxirare, Anniieemal, Stylescrapbook, etc.), where people are free to upload their own photographs and create a desired image of themselves, they do so in a consistent manner with advertisements. The advertisement industry's messages seep into daily lives. Those who argue ordinary Americans don't keep blogs or upload themselves in infantilizing positions must keep Goffman's main

argument in mind: “although [the advertisements compiled for his research] cannot be taken as representative of gender behavior in real life... one can probably make a significant negative statement about them, namely, that as *pictures* they are not perceived as peculiar and unnatural” (Goffman). Advertisements are reflective of how we think, not how we act. Our understanding of these depictions of women’s subordination as natural sheds light upon progress yet to be made.

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