

# The world of ads: not so wonderful for women

No one pays much attention to advertising. But the negative images in advertising are designed to keep us insecure, anxious...and buying, says Jean Kilbourne.

Kilbourne has researched for fifteen years the values and attitudes advertising presents to us and is concerned with its power. She spoke and gave a slide presentation Tuesday night in SUB theatre.

By themselves, ads are silly, trivial, often stupid. But "considered cumulatively, ads' impact is considerable. The effects are inescapable...as the pollution in the air we have to breathe." North Americans are exposed to about 1,000 ads a day.

To sell products, advertising "sells values and concepts of love, success...and normalcy. Ads tell us who we are and what we should be."

"Advertising reflects a mythology of a culture, not the reality...Basically women are still shown as sex objects or demented housewives obsessed with cleanliness." The image of men is also distorted to show them as tough, invulnerable and unfeeling.

"The negative and distorted image of women affects everything feminine. Human qualities get divided up and polarized." 'Feminine' values like compassion, empathy, and sensitivity are devalued.

"We need men and women with both types of qualities." Men and women like this generally don't exist in advertising.

The slide presentation began with a look at the flawless beauty of makeup ad models. "The most important aspect of this flawlessness is that it cannot be achieved...it's a look that depends absolutely on cosmetics, airbrushing, camera angle...It's inhuman in its flawlessness...It's the only standard of beauty for women in this culture."

This standard is also the ultimate standard in worth.

"The message is basically that we are ugly in our natural state...you will not do as you are, learn to buy the right products, change the way you look and then you might be considered as attractive."

An inevitable extension of this 'product is the woman' attitude is that women are objectified. "As the face becomes less and less real, she becomes what she puts on. "The woman becomes a thing, a "package".

The cumulative effect of this is that men and women learn to relate to woman's bodies as objects.

"Women are often grouped together as things, decorations." The consequence of this objectification is violence.

"Turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step toward violence against that person...the violence is the logical result of this kind of objectification."

"Violence against women in ads creates a climate...in which this kind of thing is seen as more normal, more acceptable, and in which women are seen as being more likely desiring it."

"The violence is not a laughing matter but again and again it's depicted in this way."

Women are pictured in ads as parts of bodies, "hacked apart, dismembered...anything but whole human beings...Not only is she a thing but only one part of that thing is focused on."

The recent trends in advertising also point towards an increased use of children. While these ads are not kiddie porn they create "a climate in which it becomes increasingly acceptable to look upon children in this way."

"For several years now we've been getting the message that we are supposed to be both innocent and sexy, virginal and experienced, all at once...The underlying message is that we shouldn't grow up, we shouldn't become mature sexual beings...that's frustrating and limiting to adult women. It's also a message that's dangerous for little girls...The flip side is that the little girl herself is the ideal, the real sex object."

"It only takes a few seconds, as you flip  
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through magazines, drive past billboards, watch television, for images to register and to affect you very quickly, cumulatively, and again for the most part unconsciously and it almost always intends to."

Another strong message is ads and the models in the ads is to be skinny, at any cost. Kilbourne pointed to ads for Anorex a "fat sex cure" and an article in a woman's magazine titled, *Five bodies to die for*. "This has serious consequences...it is estimated today that 1 out of 5 college age women in North America have a serious eating disorder, the most common of which are anorexia and bulimia...and they seem to me directly related to this increasing obsession with thinness in women...yesterday's symbols would be considered fat by today's standards."

"Women's magazines are filled with three kinds of ads and articles. Ads featuring very thin models, often models suffering literally from anorexia, and ads for diet products and that's no coincidence. It creates a market for a multi-billion dollar a year diet industry."

Besides the message that women must be thin is the message that women must be young in advertising. "There is a real taboo against aging for women. We are simply not supposed to age at all...There's a real double standard, however. It's OK for men to age, but not women...The older woman is beautiful only insofar as she stays looking like a very young woman...it's not acceptable for her to show any of the signs of aging" like grey hair or wrinkles.

One of the ways women are coned into believing this double standard is the way older women are portrayed in advertising. Older women are "treated with derision and contempt, she's treated as completely valueless."

"Aging is presented to women as a process of inevitable loss with absolutely nothing to look forward to."

Some advertising campaigns are particularly loathsome. Products like feminine hygiene sprays "teach everyone real loathing, fear, disgust, contempt for women's bodies."

Campaigns like Hanes pantyhose: Gentlemen prefer Hanes; are done at the expense of relationships between women. "We are conditioned to believe that women will always betray each other, for the attention and the approval of men."

"A lot of men have felt insulted about this ad too because they feel it's saying that men's relationships are so trivial and shallow that they can be easily disrupted by a prettier pair of legs."

A woman is valuable only if she is beautiful and young. Important work women do in the home, or with children is of no value. The homemaker, for example "is often shown in a demeaning and degrading way. Even when we're shown in our natural roles as homemakers, nurturers, food givers, whatever, we're shown as losers, incompetent, unable to do it right."

"The primary motivating factor in most advertising is anxiety. Here it is about not being a good enough mother. Earlier it's about not being young enough, beautiful enough, thin enough. Men are usually made to feel anxious about not being rich enough, powerful enough, successful enough. If you look below the surface of most ads you'll find some kind of anxiety."

The solution to this guilt and anxiety is another product—a new headache pill, a vitamin. "Almost half the women in the United States have been on or are on tranquilizers."

"This takes a socialized political problem and reduces it to the level of an individual personal one—making every woman see herself as isolated, alone, rather than part of a much larger and political picture."

"It wastes a lot of individual lives, and it also wastes all that collective energy that might otherwise go to finding a real solution to these problems rather than the illusive

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ones of drugs."

Rather than feeling there is a major problem in the system, we are made to feel like an individual failure because we didn't use the right product, or wear the right designer clothes, or carry the right brief case.

The solution is not to become like men, for our work is to be valued. The way models are posed reinforces the division. "Women are posed in very frivolous, distorted poses...Men are frequently posed staring stoically, impassively ahead while women look adorably, dependently on. Women are always inviting overtures and always welcoming them no matter how inappropriate they might be."

"We all have two very basic human needs—to love and to work. All of us, men and women, need relationships that are meaningful and work that is meaningful, and the way it's been set up, few of us get either. Men have been told they must concentrate entirely on work and women entirely on love and that division has caused a lot of harm."

The solution to these negative images is simply dialogue. "The messages are hidden...my goal is to make the message conscious, overt." This is the only way to take the power away from advertising and give it back to us.