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Sex Misplaced



Fig. 1. This advertisement for Lynx body spray debuted in 2011 in the United Kingdom. The advertisement ultimately became banned when just ten people complained about the nature of the advertisement (*Business Insider*, Jim Edwards).

In the advertisement above, viewers would likely be surprised to find out that this advertisement strives to sell Lynx men's body spray, not women's lingerie or perhaps a new oven (Edwards). In the United States alone, television-watchers and magazine-readers alike certainly expect to see advertisements frequently: according to Jean Kilbourne, a researcher of sex in advertising since the 1960s and writer of a series of documentaries titled *Killing Us Softly*,

companies in the United States spend more than \$250 billion a year on advertising. Americans, on average, see or hear over 3,000 advertisements per day, and spend two years of their lives watching television commercials alone (*Killing Us Softly 4*). And if they do not see sex in the advertisements, they almost certainly see it in the television shows they watch: Abigail Jones, senior writer at *Newsweek* and a *New York Times* bestselling author, points out in her article that in a study conducted in 2005 by the Kaiser Family Foundation, results showed that sex scenes on television almost doubled between 1998 and 2005. During prime time television, 77% of shows had some kind of sexual content (Jones). As a potential marketing or fashion business student, it shocks me that this industry lacks the vision to advertise a product for its true value or produce a show without some kind of sexual content. Furthermore, sex in the media should be eliminated due to its harmful effects on viewers.

From a business perspective, consumers can likely understand why advertisers resort to the easy, attention-grabbing technique of using sex in advertising so frequently. According to James King, Alastair McClelland, and Adrian Furnham, coauthors of an article for *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, advertisement memory prevails as one of the most important factors a commercial could master. So, it makes sense that advertisers use sexual content: researchers have found “strong physiological evidence” that when viewers see sexual advertisements, not only do they experience heightened arousal but also a heightened attention span, which could ultimately lead to better memory of the commercial (210). But what if they remember the commercial itself, but not the product? According to Rance Crain, a former senior editor for *Advertising Age*, “only 8% of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain” (qtd. in *Killing Us Softly 4*).

Therefore, if a viewer sees a commercial or magazine advertisement filled with sexual images, predictably only 8% of the ad's message that they will remember will *not* be the product, but rather the breasts or legs they see on the page. In an article published in *Psychological Bulletin*, Robert B. Lull and Brad J. Bushman quote Tom Reichert, who works in the Department of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Alabama. Reichert says, "sex appeal is effective at attracting attention to an ad, but memory of the advertised brand is inhibited by sexual content" (qtd. in Lull and Bushman 1024). Understandably, companies want to use tactics that draw attention to themselves and ultimately make the consumer remember the commercial. However, certainly different tactics exist that could both help consumers remember the *product* and not just the commercial: two ways advertisers could get their points across include first-hand testimonies from product users and showing the product in action. Most importantly, if techniques like these were used, the exploitation of women in commercials and advertisements in general would significantly diminish.

Jones goes on to say that historically sexual media, especially in advertising, exploded in the 1980s: Brooke Shields, who was fifteen in 1980 when she starred in several Calvin Klein ads and commercials, epitomized the idea that sex does sell. In her commercials, she uttered lines like, "mama says he's only interested in my Calvins'" and "'you wanna know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing'" (Jones). This was not Shields's first involvement in sexual media and advertising, either: at age ten she sported an oiled-up body and made-up face while posing for risqué bathtub photos that appeared in *Sugar and Spice*, a Playboy Press publication, and even in large prints on Fifth Avenue in New York City, all with her mother's consent (Jones). What Shields started and the public responded to in 1980, Calvin Klein

continued and still continues to use today. King, McClelland, and Furnham also stated in their article that Calvin Klein continued this sexual tactic advertising in 1995, ultimately doubling the sale of their jeans (210). In more recent years, Calvin Klein has employed models such as Kendall Jenner (see fig. 2).

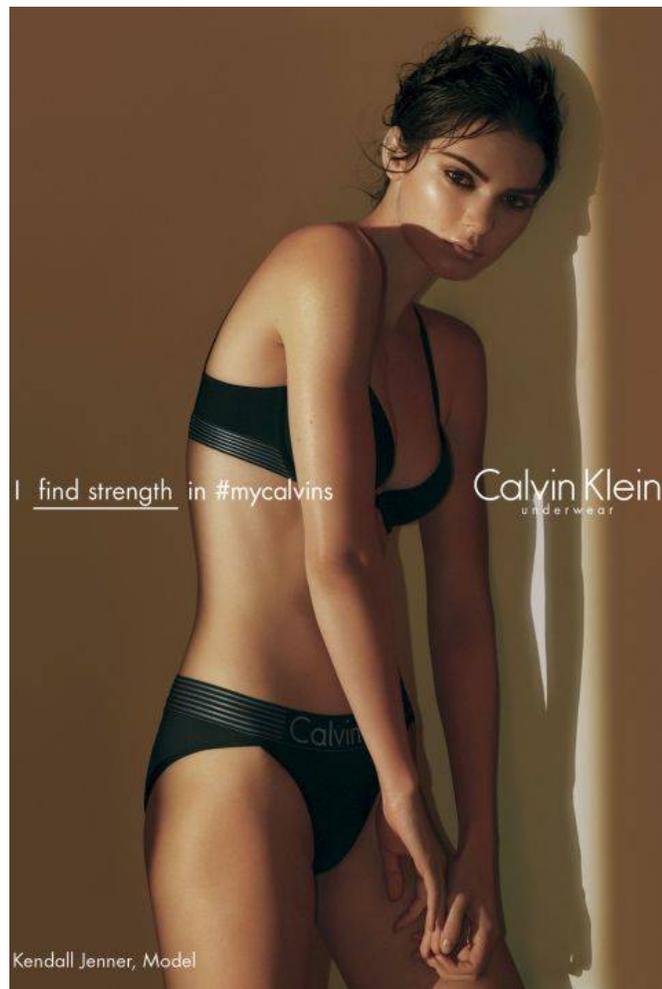


Fig. 2. In this 2016 advertisement, model Kendall Jenner “finds strength” in her Calvin Klein underwear. However, her body language says differently: with her face partially shadowed and her arms placed awkwardly in front of her chest, Jenner appears insecure and quite the opposite of powerful and strong (*Racked*, Cameron Wolf).

Granted, Calvin Klein's success with their half-naked advertising is probably partially due to the fact that they actually advertise clothing pieces like underwear and loungewear.

According to Chang Chun-Tuan and Tsang Chien-Hun, whose article appears in the *International Journal of Advertising*, success with this kind of advertising depends on two factors: how the product relates to sex, and the level of dress the model wears (or does not wear). These "levels of nudity" include low, moderate, and high: low meaning the model appears fully dressed, moderate meaning swimwear or lingerie, and high meaning full nudity (560). Since Calvin Klein's various lines, especially their underwear line, *do* relate somewhat to sexual imagery and they utilize a moderate level of nudity, these factors explain how their advertising methods have been overall successful.

However, regardless of the effectiveness of Calvin Klein's advertisements for the company, any ads that flaunt half-naked, seemingly perfect women not only harm the image of women as a whole, but also on a personal level. Exposed to this kind of advertising daily, women have no choice but to both pay attention and compare themselves to the women they see in the advertisements. These advertisements fuel a tormenting, completely false cycle: women exposed to these kinds of advertisements compare themselves to models like Kendall Jenner, but in reality, Kendall Jenner does not even look like the Kendall Jenner portrayed in the ad. Kilbourne goes on to quote Ken Harris, a photo-retoucher: "Every picture has been worked on some twenty, thirty rounds going back and forth between the retouchers and the client and the agency. They are perfected to death (qtd. in *Killing Us Softly 4*). Clearly, the models in these advertisements do not even reflect an accurate representation of themselves, yet women are

still pressured to buy makeup products, clothing, and perfume to look, dress, and even smell as “sexy” as the models.

Sadly, sex in advertising does not exist just in product ads, but also in ethical campaigns: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has a long history of utilizing suggestive advertisements. Trisha Dejmanee, whose article appeared in *Austrian Feminist Studies*, points out that PETA launched their famous “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur” campaign in the 1990s. In 2011, researcher Emily Gaarder worked with female volunteers from PETA and came to the conclusion that some women felt conflicted about sexism in the ads, while others felt feelings of “downright hostility” towards groups that would try to hinder PETA’s animal protection objectives, regardless of whether or not PETA was actually objectifying these groups, specifically women (311). Dejmanee also compares two of PETA’s famous ads: one from 1994 and one from 2007. The 1994 ad featured Cindy Crawford, nude only from the waist up. Her stance and the fact that an “artfully poised cat” covered her breasts helped to tone down the suggestiveness of the ad (315). Holly Madison starred in the 2007 ad, and the image proved to be even more suggestive than its predecessor: Madison is shown leaning forward, hands on knees, cleavage exposed. With the campaign slogan placed directly under her breasts, viewers have no choice but to stare. Madison’s pose seems not only more suggestive, but more submissive. Compared to Crawford, who stood in her picture, Madison appears more submissive since she kneels on her knees. Her parted lips and blank stare only strengthen this idea of a submissive, sexy woman (315). Certainly PETA could envision and create advertisements that do not demean women and also truly focus on the animals.

Advertisements for so-called ethical organizations should not tear down another group in order to promote their own.

Crawford and Madison's ads only scratch the surface of PETA's provocative history, Dejmanee points out. More recently, Sasha Grey, an adult film star, starred in an ad, nude, only covered with the words "Too Much Sex can be a Bad Thing" for a campaign promoting spaying and neutering pets, and an ultimately-banned television commercial titled "Milk Gone Wild" featured women revealing their chests, which contained udders that squirted milk (316). To critics of their campaigns, PETA replies that their ads are not exploitative, simply because they involve voluntary, willing women that receive benefits (material or other) for appearing in the ads (316). Furthermore, these kinds of ads simply cannot be the most effective marketing techniques: when viewers see these images, they could either be distracted completely from PETA's purpose and vision and forget what the advertisement was even for, or simply adopt an attitude of disgust by the advertisement choice and flip the page or change the channel without a second thought. Advertisements like the ones PETA utilizes are not only unnecessary for their campaign, but also completely exploit women. As stated earlier, in one of the advertisements Madison appears to viewers as submissive, dumb, and a sex object, not as a powerful, confident woman standing up for animal rights. Carol Adams, who wrote *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* and has fought for both animal rights and feminism for more than thirty years, summed up the ultimate effect of PETA's ads when she wrote, "the message to men appears to be: you can still have objectified bodies in your life-they simply cannot be the bodies of nonhuman animals" (qtd. in Dejmanee 317). Ultimately, organizations like PETA that have good intentions could potentially destroy their reputation due to using

advertising techniques that in reality, have nothing to do with their campaigns in the first place. While their push is for viewers to adopt their message, their advertisements really just show viewers another impossible beauty standard to live up to.

Certainly advertising remains a very important, crucial tactic for companies and organizations alike. In fact, Kilbourne summarizes the importance of this idea when she says, "ads sell more than products. They sell values, they sell images, they sell concepts of love and sexuality, of success and perhaps most important, of normalcy... But what does advertising tell us about women? It tells us as it always has that what's most important is how we look" (*Killing Us Softly 4*). Advertisements are arguably one of the most powerful and frequent images Americans see every day. If companies and organizations came together and pledged to stop the use of sexual imagery in their advertisements, not only would more viewers remember companies' actual products and not just the ad, but they would also stop harming society's view of women as a whole.

Additionally, the use of sex runs rampant in other forms of media, such as television shows or on the Internet. Jones points out that as the late 1990s and early 2000s progressed, reality TV grew in popularity. The study conducted by Kaiser found that while only 28% of these shows included sexual content, they "largely presented young women as sluts, prudes, bitches, gold diggers, and emotional basket-cases" (qtd. in Jones). Today, while these shows still prove popular, the focus of television shows has shifted to the lives of younger girls: shows like *Dance Moms* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which feature young girls in heavy makeup and skimpy dance or pageant outfits, have fascinated and horrified viewers in the past five years (Jones). Regardless of the age group portrayed in these shows, viewers young and old can be

detrimentally effected. Young and older women alike could potentially compare themselves and their lives to the women and families on reality television shows, whether consciously or subconsciously. Once this happens, dissatisfaction with one's own self and life could occur, and again, women compare themselves to something that is not even real.

Media producers and advertisers alike should start to ask themselves how their creations affect not only the whole population but specifically younger viewers. From an advertising perspective, Jones points out that historically, adolescent, middle-class girls have always been a desirable target, whether it be the 1940s when Helen Pessel began selling her Little Lady line that consisted of cosmetics for six to fourteen year-old girls, or 1959 when Barbie launched onto the product scene (Jones). More recently, Jones perfectly sums of the progression of both marketing tactics and media exposure when she says, "over the past two decades, the rise of the Internet and social media initiated a dramatic shift in popular culture: Almost everything that could be sexualized has been sexualized, producing a new generation of girls racing toward womanhood before even finishing puberty" (Jones). Jones also says that in America, the twenty million tween boys and girls maintain \$43 billion in spending power per year, and marketers spend approximately \$17 billion per year just to grab the attention of this specific age group. Jones proposes that marketers regularly ask questions like, "what exactly to preteens want? What are they buying?" and that "from Build-a-Bear and American Girl dolls to thong underwear, tween consumerism reflects just how young, old, and in between this demographic is" (Jones). Young girls, whether eight, twelve, or fifteen years old are just starting to question the world around them and experiment with products such as makeup and cell phones. When girls turn on the television or surf the web on their phones, their once-innocent

minds become quickly tainted with images of toddlers in pageant dresses and spray tans or naked young women in fashion advertisements.

The shift in the product demands by this younger audience is definitely in part due to an increased availability to forms of social media, the Internet, and television shows, all which market and project sexual content. Alyssa Lerner, a mother from Westchester County in New York, tells Jones, "'one of our daughters searched 'bunnies kissing' around Easter. She wanted to see cute pictures of bunnies kissing. And Playboy bunnies came up... All of a sudden, the outside sexual world touches them [sic] That's the perfect example of innocence gone wrong'" (qtd. in Jones). And that instance just shows the outcome of an accidental search on the Internet: anyone with a smartphone has access to social media platforms, and young girls are no exception. Ultimately, women of any age can develop poor self-body image when scrolling through pictures of almost-perfect women on social media. In fact, Kilbourne goes on to point out that being exposed to demeaning advertisements and other forms of media has clearly affected women's self-esteem so much to the point that the number of cosmetic procedures has risen from 2.1 million in 1997 to 11.7 million in 2007--an upward change of 457% (*Killing Us Softly 4*). Jones also points out that of course, social media, the Internet, and the sexy images they promote could have a good side: if young female viewers can distance themselves from these images and advertisements, social media has the potential to help tweens and teens branch out and meet new people, find new ideas, and learn new information (Jones). However, since sexual advertisements and social media seem to appear everywhere a young woman turns, social media will continue to be harmful to young viewers until a change evolves in the entire media industry.

Ultimately, sexual imagery in media persists as an epidemic in the United States. Television shows, advertisements, social media platforms: regardless of the format, sexual media affects everyone because of the stigma it attaches to women. Edwards goes on to say that the Advertising Standards Authority in the United Kingdom also banned another ad similar to the Lynx one shown above after receiving ninety seven complaints. Citizens that complained thought the advertisement "offensive because it was sexually suggestive, provocative, indecent, glamorized casual sex, and because it objectified and was demeaning to women" (qtd. in Edwards). Certainly the United Kingdom does not exemplify a perfect advertising spectrum; this would be nearly impossible. However, the United States should follow the lead and both listen to its citizens and look out for them, and specifically for women who are being exploited in advertisements daily. Sex itself is not the problem, but rather the way advertisers and media producers portray it. These completely unnecessary tactics ultimately demean women, destroy their self-confidence, and need to be stopped in order for women's rights and equality to continue to move forward instead of spiraling backwards.

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