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Sex, Sexuality & Violence: A Modern Day Advertising Analysis

If I were to ask someone whether they've heard the saying "sex sells," I'm sure that the answer would be a resounding yes. In fact, over the past decade the use of sexual imagery in advertising has become increasingly common and seen as publicly acceptable. In her video *Killing Us Softly 4*, Jean Kilbourne states that sex has even become trivialized, due to its overuse and acceptance in everyday advertising. Not only does modern advertising make sex more trivial, it also creates the idea that levels of violence are now acceptable as well, due to the association with sexual acts. This is clearly seen in the two ads below by fashion company Dolce & Gabbana.

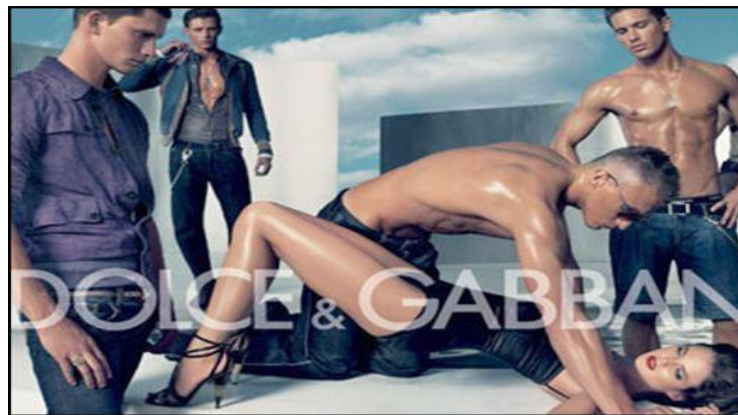


Fig. 1. Dolce & Gabbana RTW Spring 2007 Ad 1

The advertisement shown in figure 1 includes perfectly straight lined white buildings set against the backdrop of a bright blue sky. It features four men surrounding one woman. Though

the advertisement is for clothing, the ad itself does not include much clothing at all, as only two of the men featured in the ad can be considered fully clothed. The other two men in the advertisement are shirtless, revealing what would be considered perfectly sculpted torsos. The lighting in the photo highlights only the definition of their musculature, undoubtedly with the intent of signifying strength in masculinity. The woman in the ad is wearing very little clothing, and is awkwardly positioned with her back and shoulders pinned to the ground beneath one of the men. On the surface, the images in this advertisement seem pretty straightforward. However, as Kilbourne points out in her video, “only 8% of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind.” So what else could this ad truly be selling? What is the true focus?

One key item that Kilbourne points out in her video is that advertisements often reflect the assumed gender roles in society. If you analyze advertisement number one, this does indeed prove true. When you observe the elements of the men in the advertisement, they all appear to be positioned above and looking down upon the woman. One of the men is even holding down the woman, exerting his position of dominance as she relinquishes in submission. This is a clear reflection of assumed roles that masculinity and femininity play in society. Men are often seen as strong and powerful, while women are typically viewed as submissive. While this is not specifically mentioned in the advertisement, the picture itself relays this idea subconsciously.

The use of sex or sexuality that Kilbourne speaks of in her video is also very evident in this advertisement. While she speaks to the overuse of the sexual appeal of women in advertising, it is in fact the sex appeal of men that is dominant in this advertisement. The stern gaze of a perfectly tanned man with perfectly contoured muscles and a flawless frame definitely add to the sexual appeal of this ad. A young man observing this ad could very likely associate being viewed as sexy with strength, perfection and dominance. However, even the previous

example could be viewed as somewhat of a surface item when compared to a much more subtle subconscious advertising element: The clear blue sky.

Most people associate clear blue skies with beauty and acceptance that things are great. So it is absolutely understandable that this advertisement would utilize a clear blue sky as a backdrop to cause people to subconsciously accept such an unacceptable act as rape. Upon initial view, many people would simply say that the man in the advertisement is just holding her down. That is due to the fact that subconsciously, this overall image has already been taken on as acceptable. As a result, everything that takes place in this type of ad is now rationalized as being acceptable as well. Because the overall masculine position in this ad has already been deemed as sexy or having sex appeal, the submissive position of the woman being held down is now subconsciously associated with sex as well. That type of rationalization is what leads to the sexual violence that I mentioned at the beginning. Unfortunately, our society has already decided to accept that on certain levels and categorize it as the fetish of BDSM.



Fig. 2. Dolce & Gabbana RTW Spring 2007 Ad 2

Now, let's analyze the advertisement in figure number 2. Upon first glance, many may think that this advertisement is vastly similar to the advertisement in figure number 1. The

background of this advertisement is much darker than the advertisement in figure 1. There is no visibility of the outside world. This appears to be the setting of an interior bar or even a hotel suite. This ad features four fully clothed men and one man completely unclothed. Three of the clothed men are dressed in much lighter colors that stand out against the much darker backdrop of the setting. One fourth clothed man is actually dressed in completely dark clothing. Unlike the observers in figure 1, the observers in figure 2 are actually watching with a level of admiration of the unclothed man on the ground. Also in contrast with figure 1, the unclothed man on the ground appears awkwardly positioned in a way that is actually invitational to the man standing above him unzipping his pants, rather than a position of submission like that expressed in figure 1.

On the surface, this advertisement is very similar to the first advertisement, in that it includes a number of the topics that Kilbourne pointed out in her video. The sexual imagery in this advertisement is indeed very bold in that it displays sex and homosexuality on the surface. As with the first advertisement, words do not serve the purpose that the imagery itself serves in this advertisement. However, the subconscious elements, though just as impactful, have a completely different meaning in this advertisement. Though it is designed to appeal to a different audience, the sex appeal of the men in this advertisement is very prevalent. Though one man is positioned standing above another, this advertisement does not show the same type of dominance vs. submission relationship as the first ad. This ad seems to play on the idea of willful invitation instead of dominance or control due to masculine strength.

Perhaps the most impactful subconscious feature of the advertisement can be seen in the lack of true exposure of the faces of the two main men featured in the advertisement. In her video, Kilbourne makes reference to the fact that advertisements often dehumanize women by

only showing the bodies in ads. In the ad featured in Fig. 2, a similar tactic is used. However, I feel that the intent of the advertiser is different in this case. I believe this directly symbolizes the level of societal acceptance of homosexuality. Though the sexual imagery is accepted as a part of the advertisement, the faces of those involved are not. I feel that this could lead one to the belief that it is okay to live a homosexual lifestyle, but not if you expose who you are while doing so.

As stated in both of the above examples, advertisements play a much bigger role in society than just selling us products. Companies have utilized advertisements as mirrors of the collective subconscious of society. While it is proven that the majority of advertising is received subconsciously, it is our challenge to control what we choose to consciously accept. So the next time you view an ad on television or in a magazine ask yourself one question. What are they really advertising?

Works Cited

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