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Promotion of Destructive Stereotypes through Advertising

Advertisement has evolved since its inception, and in the modern era, it has increasingly been seen to focus on individuals' physical appearance and stature. Some studies argue that this approach inevitably promotes certain images (mostly negative) of individuals used in advertisements, particularly women. In her influential video lecture "*Killing Us Softly 4*," Jean Kilbourne powerfully argues that advertising promotes destructive stereotypes that reduce women to sexualized objects. As she analyzes hundreds of print and TV ads, Kilbourne reveals an epidemic of media messages that diminish women's humanity through objectification and unrealistic beauty ideals. While American society as well as the rest of the world has made considerable progress, gender inequality persists, and advertising continues to reinforce problematic attitudes. This essay argues how the advertising industry targets young girls, imprinting messages that contribute to body image issues and low self-esteem using *Killing Us Softly 4*, *The Longest War,*and Frisoli’s article to reinforce the nature of gender inequality in contemporary society.

According to Kilbourne media aimed at girls sexualizes them at shockingly young ages, promoting "an obsession with self-transformation" (Killing Us Softly 4). Advertisements depict young girls wearing heavy makeup, adult styles of dress, and sexualized poses more appropriate for adult women. Psychologists have found such sexualization to have many negative effects on girls, including anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, marketers relentlessly objectify girls' bodies to sell beauty products, dieting aids, and more. Similarly, in the article *The Longest War,* the author traces how violence and oppression against women have been embedded in social structures and attitudes for millennia. This systemic misogyny lays and continues to lay the groundwork for modern advertising that reduces girls to sexualized objects and targets their insecurities. The author shows how the dehumanization of women is nothing new, but rather is an ancient phenomenon that continues today through modern means like media and advertising. "Violence doesn't race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have gender" (Solnit, p.21). Based on this assertion, it can be deduced that violence against women has been tolerated and normalized for several years and this parallels how advertising has normalized the objectification of women's and girls' bodies to sell their services or products. Moreover, Solnit's analysis of how religion, law, culture, and other structures have perpetuated anti-woman attitudes provides a foundation for critiquing ads that promote harmful attitudes about girls' worth, capabilities, and purpose in society.

Additionally, Kilbourne in her lecture notes that models cast in ads are "young, white, and impossibly thin" (Killing Us Softly 4), presenting a physical ideal that is unachievable for most girls and women. There is a direct link between exposure to such idealized images with rising body dissatisfaction among American females. Sadly, eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia often begin in adolescence, as girls compare themselves to airbrushed models thus demonstrating how some of the advertisements have lasting effects on young girls. As such, the advertising industry bears some responsibility for the outcome and endurance of these implications in society. Comparably, the violence against women is an “ongoing war” and Solnit’s elaboration of this phenomenon connects to the essay’s argument on the epidemic of destructive messages targeted at girls. It is implied that feminist progress does not mean the war is over or that constant vigilance is not needed. However, what this communicates is that a call for concerned citizens to continually challenge gender stereotypes and the sexualization of young females in media is paramount. The historical violence against women reinforces the urgency to limit and alleviate possible contributors to violence through female objectification as well as confronting modern iterations of misogyny like advertisements that prey on girls' insecurities just as male figures have done for years.

Based on Kilbourne’s assertion, the cumulative outcome of advertisements that objectify women is to reduce this gender to sexualized objects rather than fully realized human beings. This symbolic annihilation of women in advertising reflects and reinforces gender inequality in society. Therefore, there is a considerable need for activism and education to challenge these distorted images, so future generations can see healthy representations that affirm the full humanity of girls and women. The key message is that advertising shapes cultural attitudes about gender in destructive ways that we must counteract. Comparably, cultures across history have assimilated sexism and misogyny whereby oppression of women has continued for millennia through religion, laws, customs, as well as other means (Solnit, p.22). In this case, there has been considerable progress to overcome the implications of these occurrences through widespread awareness and education. Nevertheless, legal protections and resources for women need to be enhanced in society and across various nations. This underscores the role of legal protections in curtailing targeted advertising that corrodes the basic nature of morality and seeks to counteract the foundation of femineity and what being a woman means in modern-day society. While Solnit calls for continued action to provide justice, support, and safety for women and the recognition of historical patterns of violence and work to dismantle these elements and norms, this should also apply to young girls being misled and negatively affected by female-objectifying ads.

On the other hand, Frisoli agrees with Kilbourne's assertion that advertisement has a negative influence on females and further reinforces the thesis' assertion that ads promote damaging gender stereotypes that harm young girls psychologically. Using several academic research, the author shows how gender-based advertising leads to negative psychological outcomes in children including low self-esteem, distorting body image, and even depression. The article highlights the power of advertising agencies and organization's ad placement approach claiming that advertisement approaches "could turn children away from their true preferences, as these children have no idea what they are missing" (Frisoli, p.25). What we notice from this statement is that certain advertisements prey on young people's desires and perception of reality and this empowers them to have an immense influence on children. As such, when agencies continue to propagate and normalize various ads of women of various statuses' they create a perception or illusion among young girls of what 'true' beauty is, thus resulting in feelings of discontent, devaluation of self, loss of self-confidence, and in some cases stereotyping.While this outlines the adverse implications of certain targeted ads, it also contributes to the argument that sexualized, unrealistic advertising contributes to these comparable issues among adolescent young girls.

Some of the actions that can be adopted to help alleviate, improve, and transform the status of our society with regards to advertisements propagating destructive stereotypes is by fostering parental involvement and critical thinking about media messages (Frisoli, p.30) and guaranteeing grassroots activism and policy change to regulate advertisement content, particularly in media and products aimed at young audiences (Killing Us Softly 4). Additionally, encouraging widespread education campaigns to increase awareness about the adverse implications of the sexualized and narrow portrayal of women and girls in media can be crucial to this cause. Advertising agencies and various media organizations need to be conscious and mindful of their inevitable influence and adopt positive approaches to communicating their message to the public

In conclusion, the essay has argued the reality that the advertising industry targets young girls by presenting and imprinting messages that adversely affect young audiences in various ways including body image issues and self-confidence. Sources such as Killing Us Softly 4, *The Longest War*, and *How Commercial Advertising Enforces Gender Stereotypes among Children and the Ways This Affects Them Psychologically*provide considerable evidence to demonstrate the negative implications on society and younger audiences of such targeted advertising. Kilbourne's critique remains as relevant as ever in calling out unhealthy media messages targeted at girls. From sexy clothing for elementary school-aged children to Photoshopped models in teen magazines, advertising continues to exploit girls' vulnerabilities. Solnit's article offers a feminist analysis of how violence against women has been pervasive yet often overlooked throughout history and argues that such violence needs to be confronted as an ongoing war requiring systematic change. This relates to Kilbourne's assertions which call for concerned parents and other stakeholders (teachers, activists, and policymakers) to work together to challenge gender stereotypes and promote positive change. With vigilance, it is possible to foster a shift toward a society that empowers the next generation to reach their full human potential and looks out for young girls.

Works Cited

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