Molly Cooney

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Dr. Hofsetter

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Term Paper

Women, Influence, and Image in Digital Advertising and the Media Sphere

Digital advertising in this new media age has become one of the most powerful forces shaping how we think about gender, identity, and beauty. The emergence of expansive social media platforms, influencer culture on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, and more divisive political discourse over the last ten years has significantly changed how women are portrayed online and how they view themselves in these regards. Under the presidency of Donald Trump, these changes coincided with increased public discussion of feminism and representation, which academics often refer to as the emergence of "commodity feminism" (Gill, 2016). In this context, brands eagerly embraced and pushed empowerment-themed imagery and feminist language, but at the same time, maintained long-standing stereotypes based on the male gaze, hypersexualization, and limited standards of beauty, all of which were manifested through specific and targeted ad campaigns.

This paper examines the conflict between objectification and empowerment in modern digital advertising and the public media sphere. This analysis poses a central argument through numerous example case studies, such as Dove's “Real Beauty” campaign, the recent "Sydney Sweeney Has Good Genes" advertisements, influencer-generated content on Instagram and

TikTok, and politically charged imagery that circulated during the Trump era. The question this argument and analysis pose is: *Are these representations real progress, or do they just repackage well-known stereotypes for the multimedia digital age?*

A popular example of women's representation in digital advertising was Dove's “Real Beauty” campaign in the early 2000s. This campaign was launched in 2004 and featured natural, “real women” of diverse sizes, ages, and ethnicities rather than the expected unrealistic, airbrushed models, which was a radical and almost unseen approach at the time. The campaign was praised for promoting a variety of body types and questioning conventional, unattainable beauty standards, and made a major impact, sparking global conversations about beauty standards. However, academics such as Rosalind Gill (2008) argued that these campaigns ultimately followed consumer capitalism's logic, with the line between promotion and profit being toed. Instead of serving as a tool to reduce structural inequality, she argued that empowerment became a marketing tactic. The fundamental idea that women's value is completely tied to their appearance persisted even as Dove challenged the standards and power structure for a moment.

As advertising moved to a variety of digital platforms in the 2010s and 2020s, these discrepancies became even more noticeable. Brands frequently used phrases like "self-love," "confidence," and "authenticity," but their images still reflected narrow ideals of beauty. For instance, companies like Abercrombie, which did not do so in the early 2000s, have altered their strategies to reflect the current wave of diverse bodies in the apparel industry. For instance, they have created a Curve Love denim line to represent various body types. This itself, though, is hypocritical with the models for these lines having slender yet curvaceous bodies, perfect skin, sexualized poses, and hyper-feminine aesthetics. According to Gill (2016), this is known as

"postfeminist sensibility," in which women are portrayed as powerful, active subjects who purportedly choose sexualization for their own enjoyment. The strong social and algorithmic forces influencing the decisions women feel compelled to make are absent from this representation.

Furthermore, a notable example is the infamous "Sydney Sweeney Has Good Genes" campaign, which relied mainly on sexualized imagery disguised as lighthearted beauty marketing. Actress Sydney Sweeney starred in an American Eagle jeans campaign that drew online criticism for portraying a paradox common to digital advertising: a woman who is both consumable and confident. The ad also caused controversy due to the wordplay on "genes" and "jeans", as some critics believed it linked to eugenics, a debunked notion connected to white supremacist ideology. The monologue's remarks about genes dictating features and the advertisement's emphasis on Sweeney's conventionally appealing white, blonde, and blue-eyed appearance were cited by viewers as being appealing to the “male gaze”, instead of empowering women and simply promoting jeans.

The emergence of influencers, particularly on TikTok and Instagram, further complicates the relationship between objectification and empowerment. With an unparalleled control over their public image, social media influencers are positioned as both creative directors and entrepreneurs of their own brands. According to some academics, this autonomy challenges conventional advertising structures by providing a kind of empowerment (Abidin, 2016). With primarily female audiences, influencers frequently foster intimacy and trust by reinforcing self-proclaimed “authenticity” through personal narratives. But influencers also operate in a digital economy that values perfection, conformity, and sexualization, where not everything is as it seems. On social media sites like Instagram and TikTok, attention-grabbing images—often

idealized and hyper-feminine, centered around clothing, makeup, and "get ready with me" videos—are prioritized. To secure brand partnerships and earn a living, influencers must maintain a polished, consistent appearance. In this system, their bodies act as both the product and the advertisement; whether on purpose or not, they have an effect. Despite their seeming independence, influencers are actually heavily dependent on and constrained by the same beauty standards they sometimes claim to oppose.

Whether it comes from their favorite TikTok influencer or models in commercials, young women are especially susceptible to the pressures they see on their screens. Exposure to idealized, sexualized, and carefully selected online images is linked to increased body dissatisfaction and internalization of beauty standards (Perloff, 2014). Influencer culture often recycles long-standing standards that encourage self-sabotage, comparison, and consumption while telling them to promote self-love and confidence, but when comparison is at the core, it is difficult to attain.

In addition to being common in social media and advertising, beauty standards are also a hot topic in politics. Particularly during the first Trump administration, women's bodies became hot topics in political discourse and online communication. An increase in gender scrutiny in politics has led to the mistreatment of important female public figures such as Hillary Clinton and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Sexist clichés emerged in memes, targeted advertisements, and hurtful viral imagery in digital advertising and political messaging as a result of these dynamics. Women were ridiculed as ugly to undermine their credibility or sexualized to weaken their authority. According to Jamieson and Taussig (2017), gendered stereotypes are particularly noticeable during times of political polarization, a pattern amplified by the digital sphere. However, during this period, commercial advertisers also capitalized on the surge in feminist

activism to counter it, including the Women's March, #MeToo, and extensive conversations about reproductive rights. While continuing to use sexualized imagery and appearance-based marketing, brands sought cultural relevance by supporting these feminist causes in times of turmoil; even though they talked about empowering others, they actually upheld the systems that prevent real empowerment.

This environment is further complicated by political messages that are incorporated into social media and entertainment. With media being at the forefront, young women are exposed to images that make them think their bodies are something to market, something symbolic, and something to judge for appearance. This then causes young women to compare their own bodies to what they see marketed on the screen. This is especially harmful because carefully chosen photos on social media set unattainable standards, leading to increased comparisons and lower self-esteem (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). To counteract the prejudices created in our media-dominated society, media literacy tools that help young audiences navigate this digital culture are essential.

To determine whether digital advertising represents progress or merely perpetuates the same beauty standards for women that have endured for centuries, it is also necessary to acknowledge the medium's complexity. On the one hand, advertisements now showcase a wider range of body types, racial backgrounds, and gender expressions. Also, by enabling women with non-traditional modeling standards to influence cultural narratives, influencers have actually increased representation. But on the other hand, these advancements coexist with preexisting stereotypes. Women's bodies continue to play a major role in political and commercial messaging, and with the growing prevalence of social media, they seem destined to do so for the foreseeable future. Diversity is often used selectively. Instead of challenging structural

inequality, empowerment is often reduced to an aesthetic or branding tactic. In an attention-driven digital economy, hypersexualization and comparison culture flourish, and even the most "feminist" ads frequently function primarily to make money.

Progress may therefore be more symbolic than structural. Instead of being dismantled, many of the same gender norms—beauty as a woman's value, the female body as spectacle, and empowerment as consumption—are repackaged. The representation of women in digital advertising during the social media era, partly shaped by the political atmosphere of the Trump administration, reveals a complex interplay of empowerment and objectification, progress and regression, politics and profit. Even though feminist language is more prevalent than ever, it frequently coexists with gendered expectations and ingrained beauty standards.

As multimedia consumers, if we are to make meaningful progress, we must separate genuine empowerment from branding strategy and promote media literacy that empowers young women to evaluate the images they encounter.

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