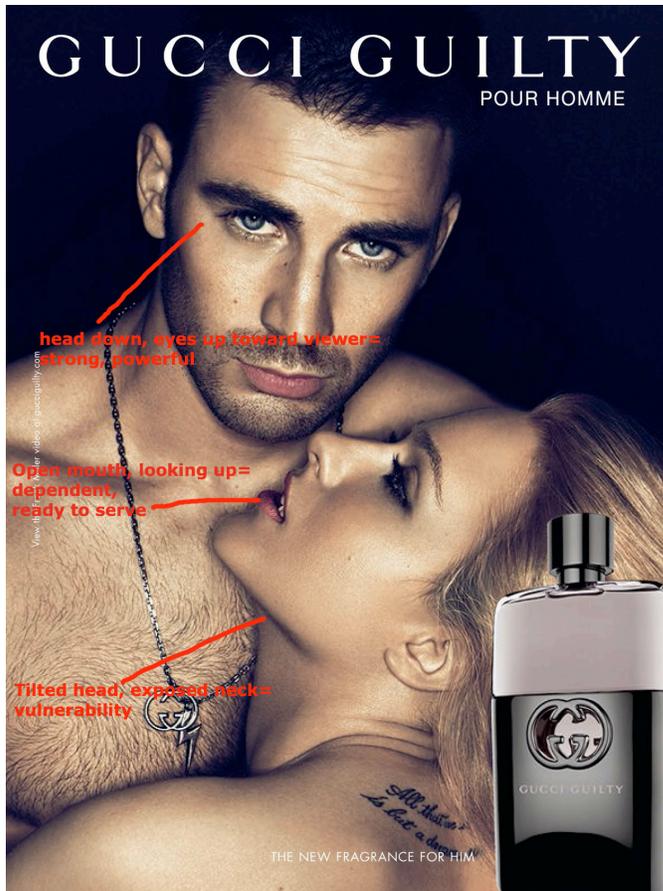


The topic of gender-targeted advertisements, specifically in American culture, intrigues me intensely because I personally feel that no one, not even society, should dictate how you should be. I disagree with many of the messages portrayed in modern advertisements, with how they affect the way we act, look, and what we buy. I have been raised in an environment where what it means to be female is dictated for me. I am expected to be a certain way and to act lady-like, and I am exhausted.

My mother always told me I could be and do anything I wanted. Everyone should be able to be who he or she wants to be, and do what he or she desires. So I ask myself why some of us cannot. Our society pressures us into strict roles; even from the time we are born, we are labeled with a certain way of being. Our biological sex dictates how we should act, how we should look, and what we should buy. From the day we are born we are taught this way of being, and one source of that influence is gender-targeted advertisements. These advertisements do not capture what real gender expression is, or even different types of sexual orientation. They are only focused on the binary of masculinity and femininity. So I ask, how does gender-targeted advertising affect gender expectations in our society and fail to capture real people? Gender-targeted advertising only captures an exaggerated view of masculinity or femininity, a view that fails to capture the separation of sex and gender and the diversity of sexual orientation, as well as causes social issues among women and men whom attempt to fulfill these expectations.

Most advertisements currently exaggerate the ideas of masculinity and femininity to extremes that fabricate a fantasy. Each exaggerated form of masculinity and femininity has their own characteristics that connect with one another. In the documentary *"Killing Us Softly 4,"* Jean Kilbourne talks about the objectification of women and men in advertisements. She states, "When men are objectified, they generally are bigger, stronger, and more powerful. When women are objectified, we're more fragile, more vulnerable, less powerful" (Kilbourne). Generally speaking, women are mostly portrayed as less powerful and men as more powerful. The message is then that to be feminine you must be "fragile" or "vulnerable," words that usually are given to someone weak. On the other hand, to be masculine you must fulfill the expectation of being "bigger" and "stronger," words commonly seen connected with power. These extremes are unrealistic; there are many various and more complicated ways of being masculine or feminine than one dominant idea. When this idea influences society we start recognizing masculinity and femininity only this way, which excludes a large portion of our population. The same idea is also illustrated in the documentary *"The Codes of Gender,"* created by Sut Jhally. Jhally explains that in advertisements men are commonly portrayed as alert, assertive, and protective, and women are portrayed as submissive, dependent, and powerless. Jhally illustrates that these characteristics are communicated through body language, or a series of positions and expressions. The body positions and expressions that are usually used by women in advertisements are off-balanced positions, a relaxed mouth, lying down, being on all fours, tilting of the head, and other positions that convey a non-defensive or submissive message. Male body positions include planted feet, good posture, heads down and eyes forward, and firm stances that convey a strong, alert message, making the man appear ready for attack. These messages convey, especially when a woman and man are in one advertisement, the relationship of being powerful and powerless. Following are a few advertisements that show this relationship.





Advertisements not only fail to represent the true range of characteristics that femininity and masculinity take, but also misrepresent the diversity of sexual orientation among real people. Advertisements portray fantasy, using only one specific type of woman and man. In *“The Codes of Gender,”* Jhally uses Paul Marciano, the cofounder of Guess, to illustrate the fantasy of advertisements. Marciano states, “We always use models. It’s difficult to find real women who fit what we’re trying to say. Real women, they aren’t as cooperative as real men” (Jhally). In this statement, Marciano shows he sells fantasy instead of reality, that he uses “real” men, but always uses models instead of “real” women. Even though he might be selling his merchandise to “real” women, he cannot use them in his advertisements because they do not “fit” his idea. So in actuality, he is selling women something that is fake, not real. Selling women something that is fake can create consequences such as a decrease in confidence, self esteem, or diet restrictions because they cannot fulfill this unrealistic expectation. Furthermore an example that shows the misrepresentation of real people is a quote from *“Killing Us Softly 4”* when Kilbourne says, “the body type, the only one, that we see as acceptable or desirable is one that fewer than 5% of American women have” (Kilbourne). If advertisements use a body-type that only 5% of women have, and portray only that type of body as beautiful, what does that say about the other 95%? It says the other 95% of body types other than this particular one are not desirable or cannot fulfill this expectation of beauty. This causes women to feel bad about their bodies, or think that they are not beautiful, causing extreme behaviors to control weight, and a general lack of

self-confidence.

Another failure of advertisements is the misrepresentation of the variety in sexual orientation; Jhally uses Hollister as an example of the dominance of heterosexuality in advertisements. His documentary states, "Women were placed strategically to ease the homoerotic undercurrent" (Jhally). From this quote it is recognizable that some advertisers, especially Hollister, are trying to downplay or "ease" any homosexuality by including a female model to ensure that their merchandise is not perceived to be aimed at a homosexual market. These advertisements fail to represent any sexual orientation other than heterosexual. Advertisements have many failures, a disturbing fact considering that advertisements have a major influence on other important social issues. An additional example of how advertisements are heterosexist is a statement made by Kilbourne in "*Killing Us Softly 4*." She explains, "Sex in advertising is also relentlessly heterosexist. Gay men barely exist outside of publications targeting them and the portrayal of lesbians almost always comes straight from the world of porn" (Kilbourne). Kilbourne says in this statement that advertising is so heterosexist that the portrayal of homosexuals is not equal to the portrayal of heterosexuals, and that advertisements either excessively sexualize lesbians or target gay men, misrepresenting them rather than presenting them as normal individuals with a different sexual orientation.

Although both women and men are targeted in advertisements, some of the most detrimental effects fall on women, including abusive relationships and health issues. Advertisements mostly sell us fantasy and sometimes when we try to fulfill those unreal expectations it can lead to another set of problems. A study in Fiji surveyed girls and how the new introduction of television affected them over a span of three years, from 1995 and 1998. Erica Goode from *The New York Times* wrote a piece explaining this study. She said, "Fifteen percent in the 1998 survey reported that they had induced vomiting to control their weight, the researchers said, compared with 3 percent in the 1995 survey. And 29 percent scored highly on a test of eating disorder risk compared with 13 percent three years before" (Goode). Although many other factors could motivate induced vomiting to control weight or eating disorder risk, there is a direct link between the increase in these behaviors and the introduction of television. Girls in Fiji were influenced by the expectations of beauty advertised on television, which caused justification for these unhealthy behaviors. Furthermore, another example of how girls are encouraged to participate in these behaviors is discussed in "*Killing Us Softly 4*." Kilbourne states, "Girls are getting the message these days so young that they need to be impossibly beautiful, hot, sexy, extremely thin, and they also get the message that they're going to fail. That there's no way to really achieve it" (Kilbourne). Setting expectations for beauty, and then telling a girl that it is unachievable and that she is going to fail, is telling the girl she is ugly. Obviously if you tell a girl she is ugly, she will have less self-confidence and try to fulfill these expectations by participating in unhealthy behaviors like developing an eating disorder.

Another effect of advertisements geared at women is the way they encourage abusive relationships. In some advertisements women are portrayed as objects or part of objects, which causes detrimental effects towards them. In "*Killing Us Softly 4*," Kilbourne says, "Turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step toward justifying violence against that person" (Kilbourne). By turning someone into an object they are making that person inferior or lowered in status, essentially dehumanizing

them. This validates abusive relationships because that person does not have equal value, making advertisements an encourager of these relationships. Kilbourne also discussed the way advertisements influence abusive behavior by equating masculinity with violence. She states, "Masculinity is so often linked with violence and boys grow up in a world in which men are constantly shown as perpetrators of violence, as brutal" (Kilbourne). Growing up in an environment where masculinity is linked with violence and violent crimes creates a misconception of normalcy, where trying to be masculine results in the belief that violence is justifiable (because it is normal), which can lead to abusive behavior. Advertisements who portray masculinity linked with violence are a major factor in influencing this behavior.

I do not want to imply that advertisements are the only cause of these problems, nor that all advertisements are horrible. There are many other factors to be considered when investigating the cause of problems such as eating disorders, abusive relationships, etc. Nonetheless, I feel that if we had a social environment where advertisements *did* portray real people, rather than fantasy, we would all be more accepting of the diversity of the American people, and of ourselves. I urge you to keep yourself aware of these advertisements and the tactics they utilize; they do not portray normalcy and they do not capture real people. Look closely and you will recognize how strange they really are. Additionally, try to be accepting and supporting to other forms of gender expression and sexual orientation, and try to recognize the beauty in all of us; everyone is different, and people should have the freedom to express themselves honestly. Life is so important, so vital, and so short. Why would you ever want to live life not being and expressing exactly who you are? Everyone should be given a fair and equal opportunity to express themselves candidly without the restriction of society's expectations. Because someone has a female or male genitalia does not, in any way, mean they need to fulfill a certain expectation. Live the way you want, be who you want, and express yourself any way you want; those are the rules I live by.

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