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Chapter 12

Selling Sex

Lisa Wade and Gwen Sharp

"Sex sells" is a common refrain used by scholars, marketers, and the general public alike to justify the use of sexualized images in advertising. Beyond the issue of whether sexy advertisements are actually an effective marketing strategy, the statement "Sex sells" begs another question: What kind of sex sells? Advertisements sell more than just products; they also sell us ideas about sex. That is, they present certain types of sex and sexual interactions as sexy, passionate, and desirable. What messages about sex and sexuality are advertisements selling?

Advertisers use a limited *version* of sex: a nearly uniformly heterosexual version that presents men as active sexual subjects and women as passive sexual objects who perform for the pleasure of the (implicitly male) viewer (Aulette, Wittner, and Blakely 2009; Eck 2007; Kilbourne 1999; Schutzman 1999). In truth, many advertisements use images that go beyond a simple active male/passive female dichotomy. They portray sexualized situations in which men are not just active but also aggressive and women are not just passive but also (potentially) victims of attack. Such representations are injurious to both men's and women's ability to develop healthy sexual selves.

In this chapter, recent advertising campaigns are employed to illustrate how advertisements reinforce and legitimize a sexual script in which men are taught to be active subjects of their own sexual pleasure, women are taught to be sexy objects of others' desires, and sexualized violence is presented as normal and even desirable. A discussion follows that details how the gender subject/object binary creates conditions that justify violent verbal and physical attacks against women in real life.¹



Published in 1922, a poster for Akadama port wine is the first time a nude woman was used in an advertisement in Japan. (Source: Suntory Limited.)

Women as Sexual Objects

If sex sold on its own accord, there would be symmetry in how frequently men and women are presented as sexy objects alongside products. Instead, the sexual objectification of women is by far the most prevalent picture. To be sexually objectified is to be presented to the viewer as an object of desire without a discernible subjective desire of one's own. For example, a recent ad for Tango classes (1) features four frames of dancing in which the woman, but not the man, becomes increasingly undressed. In the final frame, she is naked and he is fully clothed. This ad is, indeed, using sex to sell Tango, but they are using female nudity to do it.

In some cases advertisements present an attractive woman, or part of a woman, alongside the product being sold. For instance, an ad for Cabana

Cachaça rum (2) includes the lower half of a woman's body. She lies on her back and is naked except for her high heels. Her legs are crossed, but there is a noticeable bikini tan line. On the floor alongside her, between her buttocks and her high heels, sits a bottle of rum. The ad associates Cabana Cachaça with access to conventionally attractive and sexually available women. The bottle is placed between her buttocks and her feet, within inches of her genitalia, drawing our attention to her exposed body.

In other cases, ads go further than simply associating attractive women's sexual availability with a product—they conflate a woman with the product itself. For example, a recent ad for St. Pauli Girl beer includes an image of a woman's silhouette that is filled with beer—her body has the yellow color and texture of light beer, and her hair appears to be made of foam (3). Here, the purchase and consumption of a St. Pauli Girl are, symbolically, the purchase and consumption of a woman. This is echoed in the name of the beer. When you order one, you order a “St. Pauli Girl.” This merger of the woman and the beer suggests that she is a product like beer—buyable, consumable, disposable, and replaceable. In both ads, these women are not individuals with personalities, histories, and likes and dislikes. They are generic representations of sex. Their sex appeal is their only or primary characteristic. All of the other things that make women unique, imperfect, and interesting human beings are absent.

Another example is the recent advertising campaign for M&M's candy in which M&M's are anthropomorphized with each color a different personality. Notably, however, there is only one female, the green one. Unlike the male characters, which come in multiple colors, flavors, and shapes (plain, peanut, and almond), the female M&M is simply sexy. The ad campaign includes television commercials that feature a photo shoot with her as a model being ogled by the other M&M's candies (4) and print advertisements in the *Sports Illustrated* “Swimsuit Issue” in which she is taking off her green shell (5 and 6). By making all but one of the M&M's candies male and sexualizing the sole female, these ads reinforce the lesson that men's personalities and bodies vary, but women are primarily interchangeable sex objects. This is what it means to say that women are sexually objectified.

Objectification is problematic because making women into things erases their desires. Objects do not have feelings or preferences. Things do not have opinions; and they cannot disagree. If someone desires them, they can be had. If taken to its logical conclusion, two commercials for the convenience store AM/PM (7 and 8) present women as “good stuff” for

heterosexual men to consume, while an advertisement for Redtape Shoes (9) shows a man who selects from several women enclosed in a vending machine. A commercial for the Mayflower moving company equates a woman with a precious "belonging" to be protected as one would a valuable, breakable object (10). In the latter, women are precious, while in the AM/PM and Redtape examples, women are cheap (like convenience store or vending machine items). But in both cases, they are objects and their value is determined by men.

Men as Sexual Subjects

The flipside of the sexual objectification of women is the affirmation of men's sexual subjectivity. When a woman is sexually objectified, she is made into an object *for* someone. Much of the time, that someone is a heterosexual man. For example, in the AM/PM commercials, it is men, specifically, who ogle the sexualized women; in the Mayflower commercial, we see a heterosexual couple in bride and groom costumes; and it is the green female M&M's candy that poses for male M&M's. In other contexts, a male viewer is not included but is implied by virtue of already gendered cultural rules. This is true in the M&M's advertising in *Sports Illustrated* and the one for St. Pauli Beer. Both beer and sports are typically associated with men. Combined with the invisibility of lesbians, the explicit or implicit inclusion of a male heterosexual viewer is frequent enough that a sexy woman is typically understood to be "for" a man unless advertisers go to significant effort to suggest otherwise.

In presenting a sexy woman for men's consumption, advertisers send messages that normalize and naturalize male (hetero)sexuality with men as sexual creatures with desire who respond to sexy women. This is an affirmation of a man's sense of himself as a sexual person (Connell 1987). To be positioned as a subject, then, is the opposite of being positioned as an object. A subject desires, looks, and owns. Subjectivity means that your desires are centrally important. An object has no desires, can only be viewed, and can be owned.

But, just as the objectification of women specifies one very narrow version of sexiness, men are taught that only one type of sexuality is acceptable. Gay men, for example, are excluded from this binary, and their sexuality is made invisible or derided. A commercial for Moosehead Light beer (11), for example, begins with two women in bikinis spreading suntan lotion on each other. Two men, leaning forward with interest, ask, "How

come it works when they smudge stuff on each other?" the implication being "Why are two women together so sexy?" They consider, "What if we did it?" In their imaginations, experimentally, they visualize the scenario featuring the two of them. The music suddenly becomes silly, and the men sit back quickly and say, "It doesn't work." The message is that gay men are simply not sexy and that sexual attraction to men is not real.

Also excluded by advertisers is the sexuality of men who desire sexual relationships with women who do not fit norms of conventional attractiveness. A Slim Fast ad, for example (12), features the traditional bride and groom cake topper, but the bride is chubby (by some standard) and the groom is crossing his fingers so as to invalidate his vows. This suggests that no man would truly want to marry a chubby woman. Similarly, a series of Brazilian ads for Itambé Fit Light Yogurt (13, 14 and 15) features chubby women in famous poses (e.g., Mena Suvari in *American Beauty*, Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*, and Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*). The tagline is "Forget about it. Men's preferences will never change." The message for women is that men will never be attracted to chubby women, so they must change themselves. For men, it is that these women are not sexy and being attracted to them would be gross or ridiculous.

Finally, the subjectivity that men are granted alongside female sexual objectification is of a one-track mind. Men in ads want sex with any acceptable partner all the time and for any reason. This logic excludes men who desire sex only when other conditions, such as emotional intimacy, also hold.

In sum, when sex is used to sell, it usually involves the presentation of a conventionally attractive and sexually available woman as a sexy visual. Interchangeable and malleable, her own sexual desires and unique personality are irrelevant. This is sexual objectification. These ads simultaneously validate men's sexual subjectivity—the idea that men have sexual desires, wants, and needs is a central part of this narrative. However, the subjectivity accorded to men is rigidly prescribed. The narrative legitimates and indulges a particular, narrow version of male heterosexuality. At the same time that it objectifies women, then, advertising accords men sexual subjectivity but only insofar as they conform to the norm.

Object/Subject Relations

Thinking more specifically about women's sexual objectification and men's sexual subjectivity in mass media, it is useful to consider the terms "sexy" and "sexual" more carefully. To be *sexual* is to experience sexual

feelings, while being *sexy* is to inspire those sexual feelings in others. In the United States, to be masculine means, in part, to be sexual. Men are taught to recognize their sexual desires and to sexually pursue women (Kimmel 2004; Quinn 2002). They learn to say, "I want." In contrast, femininity means, in part, being the thing that men want (Jhally 2000; Tolman 2001). Women are taught to emphasize, and conceive of themselves in terms of, their sexual attractiveness so that men choose to pursue them. Instead of learning to say, "I want," women learn to say, "I want to be wanted." When women and men break these rules of femininity and masculinity, they are likely to encounter social scorn. Men who do not pursue women sexually are "pussies" and "fags." Women who pursue men are "whores" or "sluts." Wanting to avoid these labels, many men and women attempt to mold themselves into the sexual roles sold to them.

Indeed, both men and women tend to accept men's sexual subjectivity and women's sexual objectification. That is why *sexy* women grace the covers and appear in ads for both men's (such as *Maxim*) and women's magazines (such as *Cosmopolitan*) (16). That women's object status and men's subjectivity are sold to women in magazines targeted to them in no way undermines the argument that men's sexual subjectivity is being sold. It's just that it is being sold to everyone.

The selling of sexual subjectivity for men and sexual objectification of women explains a ubiquitous meme in our society. In many television shows and movies, average-looking guys are matched up with gorgeous women. Consider the couples in *King of Queens* (17), *According to Jim* (18), *The Simpsons* (19), and two couples from the TV series *Ally McBeal*: Richard and Ling (20 and 21) and John and Nell (22 and 23). The gendered object/subject binary helps explain this. Since it is men's sexual desires that are made salient, her attractiveness to him is important. Therefore, she must be *sexy*. But since women are supposed to function as sexual objects, not subjects, her desire is invisible or irrelevant. Thus, his attractiveness is unimportant.

Sexualized Violence

We have discussed how marketers typically use sex to sell, and also sell sex by offering representations of men as sexual subjects and women as sexual objects. In ads, then, because only subjects have both desires and the ability to act on them, we should expect to see men actively pursuing women and women passively being acted upon.

In fact, women's passivity and men's active pursuit are, themselves, presented as *sexy*. Representations of men pushing a woman against a wall, throwing her onto a bed, or ripping off her clothes are *supposed to be sexy*, not scary. The women depicted in these situations often respond to this aggression with sexual arousal or with resistance that gives way to sexual arousal. Aggression, in this sense, works. We are told that it is what women want. In this way, both aggressive male sexuality and women's acquiescence to male aggression are normalized. Many movies, television shows, and video games include sex scenes that seem to represent a normal, mutually pleasurable sexual interaction but rely on male sexual aggression.

Images in the mass media repeatedly reinforce the idea that sexualized violence against women is both *sexy* and legitimate. Ads often present scenarios in which it is difficult to tell whether the image is simply another example of the passive female sex object or is supposed to represent (sexual) violence against women, and feature images in which it is unclear whether there is a seduction or an assault. Although a Dolce & Gabbana ad that featured what could be interpreted as a gang rape (24) is probably the most infamous, there are many other examples. In one for Unforgivable Woman (a perfume by the rapper Sean Combs), Combs presses a woman against a wall from behind (25). An ad for Isaia Napoli clothing shows a woman who leans away from a man who has her pushed against a wall (26). A Campari liquor ad (27) shows Salma Hayek looking worried as she is pulled into an elevator by three men.

Similarly, fashion designer Brian Atwood publicized one of his collections with two ads that showed Rene Russo in situations that blurred the line between pleasure and assault. In one, she is pushed against a glass wall by a man who grabs her from behind (28). In another, she is blindfolded in a shower, and pushed against one of two naked men who stand behind her (29). A third ad in the series shows a fully clothed woman (perhaps Russo) who lies face-down in a swimming pool, apparently drowned (30). Ads that feature beautiful sexualized dead women, such as those for Lanvin (31) and Missoni (32), further contribute to the glamorization of violence and actually turn women *into* inanimate objects.

Constant exposure to this model of sexuality (the female object/male subject binary) makes it seem natural to us. If it seems natural, we may play out these dynamics in our real lives or feel uncomfortable, even threatened, when people around us do not. For example, women's resistance to male desire—in effect, rejecting their own object status and prioritizing their own desires—may seem illegitimate. They are breaking the rules.

Resistance undermines men's power in two ways. First, male desire is dethroned. *His* desire no longer dictates what and who is sexy. Second, if the object/subject binary remains in place, men risk becoming objectified themselves. If a woman can want and feel sexual desire the same as men, then men can be attractive on women's terms. This turn-around strips men of the privileged spot in the gendered sexual hierarchy that is repeatedly affirmed by advertising in the United States. When privilege is threatened, members of privileged groups often react with violence, whether symbolic or real. Accordingly, women who step outside of their object role and express desire are often policed with name calling (Tanenbaum 1999). Sexual harassment and rape, too, can be understood as responses from men who see their claim to sexual subjectivity, and the accompanying ability to objectify others, threatened (Brownmiller 1975; Connell 1995; Kilbourne 1999; MacKinnon 1989).

On occasion, advertisements reverse gender roles. However, these images reaffirm, rather than challenge, the subject/object binary. It is not that men and women are shown as equals; rather, the power dynamic has simply been flipped so that women are aggressors and men aggressed upon. In ads for Patrick Cox shoes, Voodoo pantyhose, and Dolce & Gabbana (33, 34 and 35), women step on, restrain, and beat men. While the gender roles are reversed, the assumption that sexiness is based on dominant and submissive roles, that one partner is a subject while the other is an object, remains unchallenged.

Conclusion and Strategies

If men's desires are believed to be of primary importance, and women are sexual objects, then it shouldn't be a surprise to see violent imagery in advertising in which men use force to satisfy their desires. In fact, sexualized violence is the inevitable extreme of a view of sexuality based on male-subject/female-object relations. Objects, literally, cannot have feelings or desires. Their purpose is to satisfy the desires of the male subject. If a female sexual object expresses subjective desires of her own, she is breaking the rules by calling into question the entitlement of male subjects to use her, and other sexually objectified women, as they desire.

At the same time, the prescription of a narrowly defined role for men threatens to alienate them from their own sexuality. The wide range of men's sexual desires is invisible. Whereas women may find that they repress their sexual energy in order to conform to expectations that they

be passive, men may channel their sexuality into one narrow model and actively pursue sex that they do not necessarily want because inaction is unmasculine.

The reversal of these power dynamics, when women take the subject position and men take the object role, only affirms the binary itself. Power, advertising asserts, is always part of sexuality—the only way in which women can avoid being sexual objects is to objectify someone else. What is missed by this view, and what all are denied by the subject/object binary, is a model of sexuality that emphasizes cooperation and interdependency.

What would sexuality look like if it were not about power, dominance, and submission? What would be sexy in a world where both aggression and passivity were seen as problematic ways to engage with one another?

In a world where sex and power are disentangled, a man's height and strength relative to a woman's might be less important. Beauty and thinness might be less central to a woman's attractiveness. Same-sex couples might be less perplexing. Being aggressively pursued might seem inappropriate rather than romantic. In a world in which sexual attractiveness is built on subjective preferences and experiences instead of a constant stream of carefully constructed and repetitive images, a wider range of characteristics could potentially be sexy. In this case, an individual would be free to construct a sexuality that reflects her own desires and preferences. Many under these conditions might choose more egalitarian relationships that do not depend on power dynamics and submissiveness.

Note

1. The images referred to in this chapter and referenced by the numbers in parentheses are presented at "Society Pages"; see <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2007/07/21/images-that-injure/> (accessed March 25, 2010).

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