

Advertising and Image

Do advertisements influence our self image and our self esteem?

Some critics accuse marketers of systematically creating anxiety, promoting envy, and fostering feelings of inadequacy and insecurity to sell us their products. Marketers respond that advertising does nothing more than mirror society's values, alert people to new products and bargains, or motivate people to switch brands. At the very worst, they say, it bores or annoys.

Of course, some ads provide information useful to consumers. And advertising clearly plays a valid role in an economy based on a system of free enterprise. The question is not whether advertising is valid; clearly, it is.

The concern discussed here is the relationship between the images presented in ads and our sense of self. Can ads influence what we perceive as valid roles for ourselves in our society? And can our self-image and self-esteem be influenced by advertising?

What are the images that ads present? Everywhere we turn, advertisements tell us what it means to be a desirable man or woman. Ads paint limited images of what men and women can be. Because ads are everywhere in our society, these limited images sink into our conscious and unconscious minds. In this way, ads help limit our understanding of our worth and our full potential.

Ads tend to present women in limited roles. Girls and women in ads show concern about their bodies, their clothes, their homes, and the need to attract a boy or man. Seldom are women shown in work settings, business roles, or positions of responsibility and authority. Our society recognizes many valid roles for women, but this isn't always reflected in ads.

Also, the girls and women in ads are presented as "beautiful." But ads offer a very limited, narrow image of beauty. The advertising industry favors models with facial features that look Anglo, even if the model is Black or Hispanic.

Ads also present a very thin body type as though it were the most common or most desirable body type. Researchers have found that girls and women who work as models weigh 23% less than the average female their age. And the hips of an average department store mannequin measure six inches less than that of the average young woman.

Girls, women, boys, and men seeing these commercial images may be influenced to think of an ultra-thin female body as more normal or desirable than one of average weight. The extreme preoccupation with weight fostered by advertising images is reflected in the fact that 80% of 10-year-old girls report having dieted and that eight million American women suffer from anorexia or bulimia, two potentially life-threatening eating disorders.

In reality, many different kinds of facial features and body types are beautiful. Besides, the flawless appearance of women in ads isn't even real. It's an illusion created by makeup artists, photographers, and photo retouchers. Each image is carefully worked over. Blemishes, wrinkles, and stray hairs are airbrushed away.

Teeth and eyeballs are bleached white. In some cases, the picture you see is actually made of several photos. The face of one model may be combined with the body of a second model and the legs of a third.

So many of the pictures we see are artificial, manufactured images. What happens when a girl or woman compares her *real* self with this narrow, unreal image of "perfection"? She may feel unattractive. When her self-image suffers, often her self-esteem is damaged too. She then looks for ways to improve her image and self-esteem.

Ads also present an image of the "ideal" male. Although ads targeting boys and men do not present as narrow an imaginary physical ideal as do ads targeting girls and women, they still present a very limited view of masculinity. For girls and women, body image is emphasized in most ads. For boys and men, the image emphasized is an image of attitude. Boys and young men in ads typically play the part of someone who is cool and confident, independent, even a rebel. Men in ads tend to have an aura of power, physical strength, confidence, dominance, and detachment. The implied message for the viewer is that this is the way to be cool, this is the way a young man should act.

The male image shown in ads almost never includes such traits as sensitivity, vulnerability, or compassion. This may discourage boys and men from displaying these natural and desirable human traits. Ads may thus limit a boy or man's sense of what he can or should be.

The actors in ads tend to be handsome, with clear complexions and hair that is perfectly combed or perfectly windblown. They are also almost always athletic. Physical or even sexual prowess is suggested in scenes of physically challenging, dangerous, or aggressive sports. The self-image of boys and men who do not exhibit these traits for example, who have normal complexions, are not athletic, and don't feel cool and confident may suffer when they watch these ads. Negative feelings about oneself, whether related to appearance or anything else, can be followed by lower self-esteem.

Ads offer to sell a new self-image.

Of course, the ads that injure our self-image and self-esteem don't stop there. They conveniently offer to sell a product that will solve our newly imagined "problem."

Consider this quote from Nancy Shalek, president of an advertising agency: "Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you're a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them they'll be a dork if they don't, you've got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable." Another person involved in marketing, Charles Kettering, said that selling new products is about "the organized creation of dissatisfaction."

Many commonly accepted ideas about appearance — for example, that skin should be blemish free and teeth bright white — are not absolute truths. These expectations were artificially created over a period of years by those who wanted to sell certain kinds of products and promoted the idea that we needed those products if our physical appearance was to be acceptable.

Let's take a closer look at this emphasis on appearance.

Ads tend to convey the idea that appearance is all-important. They teach us to be self-conscious about how we look. When we grow up surrounded by ads, intense self-scrutiny may seem normal.

Of course, all cultures have their own ideas about the traits that make a boy or man and a girl or woman attractive. Often these ideas are very, very different than our own. Rather, it is the level of concern with physical appearance that makes modern Americans unique. The intense concern with appearance that is so common in our culture has not been the norm in most cultures. It is an artificial concern that we have acquired from living immersed in a society dominated by commercialism.

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