Gender stereotypes in advertising and the media assignment

Art & Culture

| Gender Stereotypes in Advertising and the Media| | | | | | According to Surviving for Thriving, a nonprofit organization that helps victims of rape and sexual assault, one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetimes. This means that a total of 17. 7 million women have been victims of these crimes. While these numbers may or may not come as a shock to you, the real surprise is where they start (Surviving to Thriving, 2008). Due to rapid advances in technology and the effects of globalization we have facilitated the emergence of a media saturated world.

While the media's consistent presence has provided us with countless advantages, many negatives have also emerged. One such issue is our perception of women and men in the public eye. Because popular consumer culture is both producer and product of social inequality, we have unknowingly allowed advertising imagery to construct negative and perpetuate stereotypes of gender. Today's advertising is inundated with the dehumanization, infantilization, sexualization, and animalization of both men and women.

The gender stereotypes constructed in advertising and the media threaten society because they cause an irrevocable inequality between men and women. Standing before you today, I will discuss several types of gender stereotypes and the consequences of their perpetuation. Furthermore, I will be analyzing the situation from a conflict and interactionist theoretical perspective as well as discussing the historical roots of gender inequality in order to demonstrate how society is undermined by gender stereotypes.

When dealing with social problems, it is typically helpful to examine the issue within a theoretical framework. In doing so, we can draw upon the patterns set by other similar issues and examine the advantages and disadvantages to the various approaches. The first theoretical perspective I propose is the conflict perspective, most commonly associated with Marxist ideals. The conflict perspective " emphasizes the role of coercion and power, a person's or group's ability to exercise influence and control over others, in producing social order" (Parpart, Connelly, & Barriteua, 2000).

Much like Marxist ideas, the conflict perspective relies heavily on the idea that people compete against each other for scarce resources. The competition for these resources implies the natural emergence of constant inequality. In other words, men and women are expected to compete for limited amounts of power. However, this fight, as we will soon see, is fixed in favor of men, due to pre-existing social inequalities. Advertising and the media have taken this ongoing power struggle to create a consumer-oriented mindset that perpetuates these stereotypes.

For the most part, men are often depicted as successful breadwinners, business-type individuals, superior, powerful, aggressive and strong leaders of society whereas women are often portrayed as vulnerable, emotional, child-rearing housekeepers and needy inferiors. In light of the persisting power struggle, these stereotypes are advantageous to men and provide them with the support needed in their endeavor to achieve power. Women; however, are essentially told that they are out of their league, so to speak.

The second theoretical model is the interactionist perspective which " takes the position that it is people who exist and act...and that " society is always in a process of being created...[and that it] occurs through communication" (Parpart, Connelly, & Barriteua, 2000). Essentially, the interactionist perspective examines how society occurs as a result of interaction between individuals and groups. Proponents of the interactionist perspective would argue that women and men internalize the stereotypes depicted in the media (Parpart, Connelly, & Barriteua, 2000).

As a result, men and women act in accordance with these stereotypes thus allowing them to be perpetuated. This perpetuation causes men and women's originality and uniqueness to be consistently devalued. Another consequence is that stereotypical versions of each gender would become the norm and media owners would have the power to set the standard ideal for both men and women. Both of these perspectives provide a fundamental understanding of how and why gender stereotypes are so powerful in today's society but they fail to explain how gender stereotypes started.

In order to truly understand the power that stereotypes yield, we must first examine the historical context that gave rise to their existence. Gender stereotyping evolved with the emergence of a consumerist culture. It was vital for companies to exploit pre-existing stereotypes in attempts to attract new and loyal customers to their products (Browne, 1998). Today, gender stereotypes are visible in every form of media: in Hollywood movies, magazines, television commercials and advertising campaigns.

Gender stereotypes are often used as a marketing tool because these values have been instilled in our society for centuries and consequently, consumers view these depictions as truthful (Bessenoff & Del Priore, 2007). While the obsession with female beauty began in the 1830s when women began to compete professionally with men, we cannot truly understand modern conceptions of beauty until we examine the historical roots of Western ideals. Notions of " Perfect Beauty" and body ideals stem from the Greek arts. Initially, a nude male torso was considered perfection while female nudity was taboo (Wolf, 2002).

These conceptions stem from early Christian societies where women were often viewed as weaker simply because society was patriarchal. For the greater part of their existence, women were lower status and were hardly even recognized as persons under most laws. Therefore, they were relegated to inferiority, to be domestic; rearing children and doing household chores. Women today, however, are no longer relegated to inferior status due to their lack of ontological reality. Instead their inferior status is a direct result of being sexualized and infantilized in advertising and the media.

In his essay, Reflections on Beauty in the West, Partha Mitter states that " in our global village today, beauty is packaged and marketed worldwide through the media" (Mitter, 2000). This notion suggests that in order to determine what type of person we wish to reflect, we must turn to the advertising and marketing world. This is problematic because the marketing and advertising world exploits gender stereotypes in order to sell their products and services. If women and men are turning to these mediums in

order to build perceptions of themselves, they will undoubtedly internalize the stereotypes and consequently, perpetuate them.

The two most common forms of female gender stereotypes are infantilization and sexualization. In addition to being the most common forms of gender stereotypes intended to target women, they are the most harmful because they objectify and dehumanize women. Infantilization of women means portraying women as baby-faced, innocent and young (Ferguson, Kreshel, & Tinklham, 1990). This is an important technique in the marketing and advertising world because it depicts women as dependent, hopeless and childlike.

It plays a significant role in the perpetuation of the inequality between men and women through gender stereotypes because it implies that women need men for survival and are always in need for assistance. Once again, men are given the power while women are rendered helpless until a man comes to their rescue (Ferguson, Kreshel, & Tinklham, 1990). Sexualization of women means portraying women as erotic, highly sexual, and loose. This is an important technique in the marketing and advertising world because it depicts women as if they were only intended to be sex objects and sexual beings (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000).

It plays a significant role in the perpetuation of the inequality between men and women through stereotypes because it dehumanizes and objectifies women. The dehumanization and objectification of women places women in a position of inferiority to men. Furthermore, the woman is objectified for the pleasure of men, implying that her body is intended to be viewed and used

as an object, which signifies that once again, women yield their power to men (Pierce, 2001). It is this argument in particular that advocates use when discussing trends in rape and sexual assault cases.

Men, on the other hand, are usually depicted as animals. The animalization of men means portraying men as angry, animalistic and dangerous. This is an important technique in the marketing and advertising world because it depicts men as if they were intended to be the rulers and leaders of the world (Pierce, 2001). It plays an important role in the perpetuation of the inequality between men and women through stereotypes because it implies that men are mighty and powerful and should be obeyed. Furthermore, the depiction of men as dangerous and accompanied by animalistic instinct instills a sense of fear of men in women.

This portrayal hands all the power to men while leaving women powerless and at man's mercy. Women are constantly victimized in advertising and the media because they are perceived as powerless. This creates an inequality between men and women that is perpetuated each and every time a gender stereotype is utilized. Furthermore, the inevitable internalization of these stereotypes ensures that men and women will act in certain ways that validate these stereotypes. When women are expected to be nurturers, caregivers, homemakers, emotional and dependent in comparison to en who are expected to be tough, combative, powerful and leaders, an inequality of power is formed. " Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in a broader cultural terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a

certain way" (Green, 1984). It is clear that gender stereotypes are imposed by society as an indication of what is expected of men and women. Men are supposed to be strong, independent, emotionless, confrontational, assertive and powerful. While women are supposed to be homemakers, caregivers, emotional, polite and powerless.

The lasting perpetuation of these stereotypes provides support for the continuation of inequality between men and women. However, this inequality is detrimental to the wellbeing of society because it essentially gives men the right to degrade women, to treat them as subhuman and to exploit them at their own will. We must learn from the mistakes of the Greek and early-Christians who dismissed women and relegated them to lower classes. We must consider the lessons ingrained by conflict theory and promote equal opportunities for both men and women.

We must stand up against advertisers who make use of gender stereotypes so that we refrain from internalizing these inaccurate depictions, like the interactionist perspective warns. In doing so, we can protect our friends, mothers, daughters, sisters and cousins from sexual assault and rape. References Bessenoff, G. R. , ; Del Priore, R. E. (2007). Women, Weight, and Age: Social Comparison to Magazine Images Across the Lifespan. Sex Roles , 215-222. Browne, B. A. (1998). Gender Stereotypes in Advertising on Children's Television in the 1990's: A Cross-National Study.

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