

# Women in Ads. Visual Representation of the Female Body

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## Abstract

This paper tries to demonstrate that there is a lot more at stake than simply whether to buy a product that ads promote or not. It underlines the idea that advertisements have an impact on our lives. Whether it is about self-esteem, body appearance, ads will influence the way we look at ourselves and at others. Advertisements emphasize the importance of physical attractiveness in an attempt to sell a product, leading to an unhealthy behaviour and setting high standards. Advertising is about appearances, and also about information. The paper stresses the idea that advertising goes beyond selling a product; it sells ideas. This happens through the advertiser's skill at positioning the product, creating an image. Advertising is also about gender. This paper centers on the way women appear in advertisements, especially how their bodies are being presented.

**Key words:** advertising, advertisements, female bodies, image, self-esteem

## 1. 'ADCult'

Erich Fromm (1997) calls the modern man *homo consumens*, because he consumes everything, from material goods to emotions. He states:

The entire world in its wealth has become transformed into a consumer good. In the act of consumption the man is passive [...] Objects of consumption [...] are not seen as something that man has created but as things that are to be owned and used. Consumption is an alienated form of maintaining contact with the world which is no longer of interest or worry to man but the goal of his greed (Fromm, 161).

For Fromm (1997), hyper-consumerism is a sign of superficiality, subjectivity, and passiveness. The individual treats life as a possessing process. The critic delineates the basic differences between *being* and *having*. Being is inseparable from living experiences. Fromm sees life made for development.

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Fromm states that, firstly, the popularization of the hyper-consumer life style was determined by the system based on the rule of maximizing profit. Secondly, consumption for modern man is the most accessible form of manifesting his independence and autonomy of decision making. Each consumer decision is an act of self elevation. Man is convinced of his own importance as a consumer especially when he is underestimated in other social roles, the role of the hyper-consumer can compensate failures and deficits on other levels. Moreover, purchasing is an activity which is carried out instantly, the impulse is fulfilled as soon as it is created and this gives people a feeling of power, consumption is a type of compensation or minimization of fears.

In the hyper-consumerist era needs have become commodified. We can easily observe the numerous advertising campaigns of products, focusing on playfulness, humour. It is not about selling a product anymore as it is about lifestyle. The objective of the advertising discourse is to create a connection with the brand. “It is not enough anymore to build trust, to create awareness around a product and impose it on the memory of the consumer: you must transform the brand into a myth and make people love it,” Lipovetsky notes (apud Oana Barbu, *Promethean Advertising*). Advertising nowadays serves more human interests, nourishing sensitivity. Advertising is becoming “that story we are told before going to bed” (Barbu, 11).

Advertising has created a culture becoming not “a central institution” but “the central institution.” (Twitchell, 1). James B. Twitchell, a Professor of English and Advertising at the University of Florida, coined the term ‘AdCult’. The term explains how “a few words from our sponsor” became a torrent. We live in an age of advertising, and this new culture is ‘adcult.’ (Twitchell, 2) “Adcult is there when we blink, it’s there when we listen, it’s there when we touch, it’s even there to be smelled in scented strips” (Twitchell, 2).

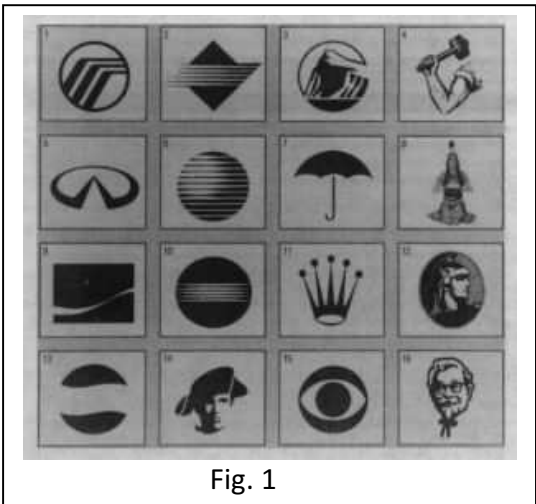


Fig. 1

A very important issue in adcult is ‘branding’. Branding is the central activity of creating different values for commonplace objects and services like denim jeans, soda, batteries. Advertising’s unique power is to give objects their identity and a value. Can you name the company or brand by these symbols? If you cannot, millions of dollars have been wasted.

At the core of adcult lies advertisement. It sits inside a medium that is consumed for entertainment value. The object advertised is commonly known by a brand name, which actually represents its separation from other like objects. If the system is working properly, you do not buy chocolate, you buy Milka.

## 2. 'ADcult' and its effects

### 2.1. Women in Vintage Ads

From the 1890s up to now, women have played the starring role in advertisements. In addition to this powerful economic role, women have been cultural icons, as well as icons in advertising, embodying concepts from peace at home to nowadays glamour. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women shifted their role from isolated domestic figures to business, political and social players. Advertising served as a recorder of the century's cultural revolution in the external and internal lives of women.



The first ad (Fig. 2) was one of a series of full page ads, part of a campaign that covered all the bases, socially speaking. All the ads in the campaign employed the exact same format as the one pictured: a beautiful art-picture, conjuring a mood of domestic calm. The success of Revlon's Charlie campaign in 1987 (Fig. 3), challenged many advertisers to incorporate feminist sensibilities into their work. The writer Robert Crooke described the Charlie campaign as "geared to a theme of energy and female self-sufficiency that borders on brazenness." (<http://www.aef.com/>) Shelley Hack, soon to join

Charlie's Angels, was the original model. The scale of feminine beauty widened to include more variables of age, ethnicity. However, the prevailing model for beauty remained youth, and emaciated.

Advertising has shifted women's image whenever the need to create a market called for it. According to Kurtz, women appear as different embodiments: the homemaker, the sex kitten and the independent woman. The Homemaker is the queen of the domestic sphere. In the early years of the Industrial Revolution, she symbolized tradition. Nowadays, she almost disappeared because of the celebration of career women. The Sex Kitten transfers eroticism to the product. She has been used to catch both women and men's attention. The Independent Woman first appeared at the turn of the century, and became a dominant figure in the 1990s. Although many advertisers have seemed unsure how independent they want their female market to be, other marketers have played an important social role by challenging stereotypes of females.

<p><b>Fig. 4</b> The Homemaker Kenwood Chef, Mixers, Processors Kitchens Gadgets Christmas (1930)</p>	<p><b>Fig. 5</b> The Sex Kitten Chanel No 5 Spray Cologne (1958)</p>	<p><b>Fig. 6</b> The Independent Woman JH Collectibles Fashion Vespa Motor Scooter (1990)</p>

**2.2. The Body Promoted by ADCult**

Youthfulness, flawless skin, thin body, are some of the attributes that women need today in order to be called 'beautiful.' Such requirements and pressures placed upon women have contributed to the increase of eating disorders, as well as increased consumerism of fashion and beauty products, and extreme growth in the cosmetic and plastic surgery industries.

The majority of advertisements and images starring women lend some advice on how to improve one’s sense of low esteem.

In a society where everything is instant and if you want it, you can have it, the female body has undergone a metamorphosis in its photographic representation. Advertising has broken the female form into separate commodities. The legs a woman has always dreamt of, the perfect lips are only a sales counter away.

A lipstick advertisement, for example, made up of an image of a whole woman within an environment, as it appeared in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 7), became a lipstick advertisement focused on the mouth (Fig. 8). However, Goldman (1992: 117) states that this transition was accompanied by a “learning process whereby readers came to accept the part as standing for the whole.”



Fig. 7 (1941 ad-DuBarry lipstick)

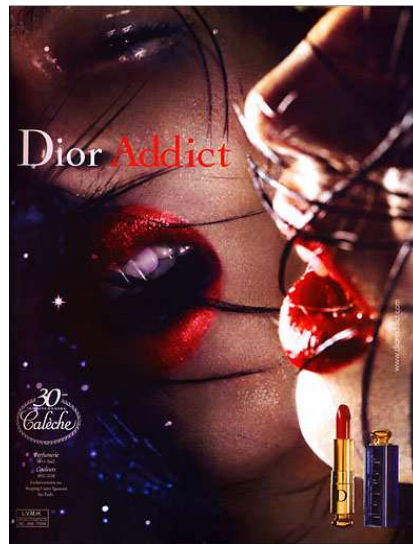


Fig. 8 ( 2011 ad- Dior Addict lipstick)

Of course, the difference between the two ads is obvious. In the former, the woman appears as the embodiment of innocence and purity. In the latter ad, the focus is on the part of the body that best promotes the product, the lips. The woman transmits sensuality and desire. The message is very clear: if you want it, you should have it. All you have to do is buy it.

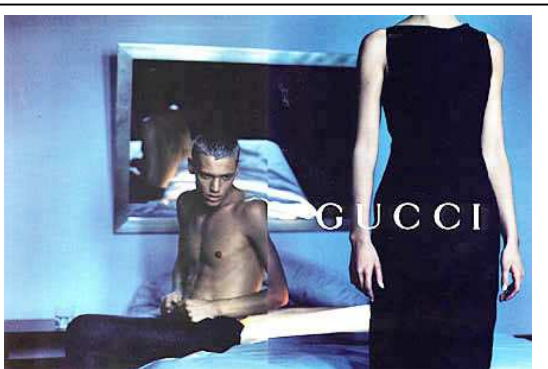


Fig. 9

The dismemberment of the female body and its treatment as a separate entity can only suggest that women’s body is not regarded as a whole, and

therefore is not connected to the woman's mind and emotions.

Thus, women become dehumanized; they become objects of consumption, broken down into component parts, each one representing an ideal form. The everyday woman can reach this level of perfection by purchasing the promoted product, obviously.

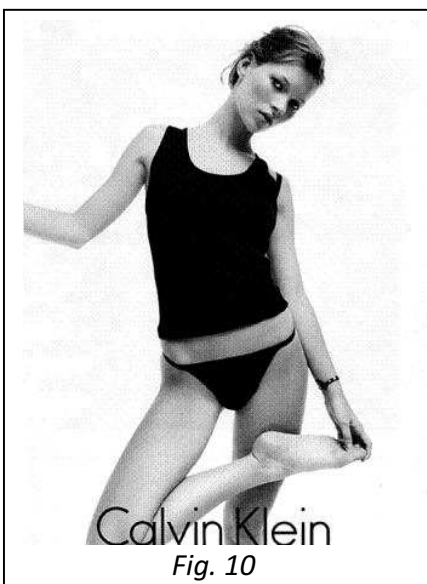
The advertising director was fired after this ad for Gucci Hats missed the mark. Body-chopping in ads occurs more frequently for women than men. By omitting the head, face and feet, the ad states the idea that what truly matters about women lies between her neck and knees. It reduces women to merely reproductive figures, not praised for their intellectual abilities. Dismemberment ads leave a feeling of separate entities. These ads encourage women to view their body as individual pieces, rather than as a whole. It also promotes the idea that women's entire perfection is spoiled on account of one less than perfect feature. For example, if a woman has less than satisfactory legs, then her potential for beauty is spoiled. In other words, if every part of the body is not flawless, then you cannot be called a beautiful woman.

### 2.3. Ads and Eating Disorders

There is a paradox in the American culture. On one hand, enjoying rich and expensive meals is portrayed as a "fitting reward for hard work" (Stephens, 1994: 1), and on the other hand women are expected to be fit and thin.

Stephens (1994) argues that the obsessive diet-mindedness in advertising provides a contract with the hedonistic attitude towards food. In several magazines, even food advertisements focus more on dieting than on quality, as Stephens (1994) mentions.

Women who are dissatisfied with their bodies have also reduced levels of self-esteem and lowered psychological well-being.



Calvin Klein is a first example of what fashion houses began to promote as beautiful and desirable in the late 1990s, as [http://www.people.com/people/kate\\_moss/biography](http://www.people.com/people/kate_moss/biography) mentions. The fashion house uses the model Kate Moss to promote the trend of anorexic and skinny-looking beauty.

Kate Moss even mentions that "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" (<http://www.pantylinepress.com/plpblog/>

2009/11/hey-fatty-get-some-self-contro.php). She quickly issued an apology saying she does not support anorexia as a lifestyle choice.

As depicted in the media, the ideal body is tall, slender, and well-toned. Advertisements promote the idea that women must adhere to this form. According to Turner's article (see Stephens, 1994), in the early 1940s Sheldon found that ectomorphic individuals were perceived by others as nervous, submissive and socially withdrawn. By the late 1980s, however, this perception had changed: thin, lean and fragile bodies were considered to be the most sexually appealing. The female body in the media has become increasingly thin (Stephens, 1994). Stephens (1994) mentions that during the period from 1970 to 1988, Miss America contestants continued to decrease their body size.

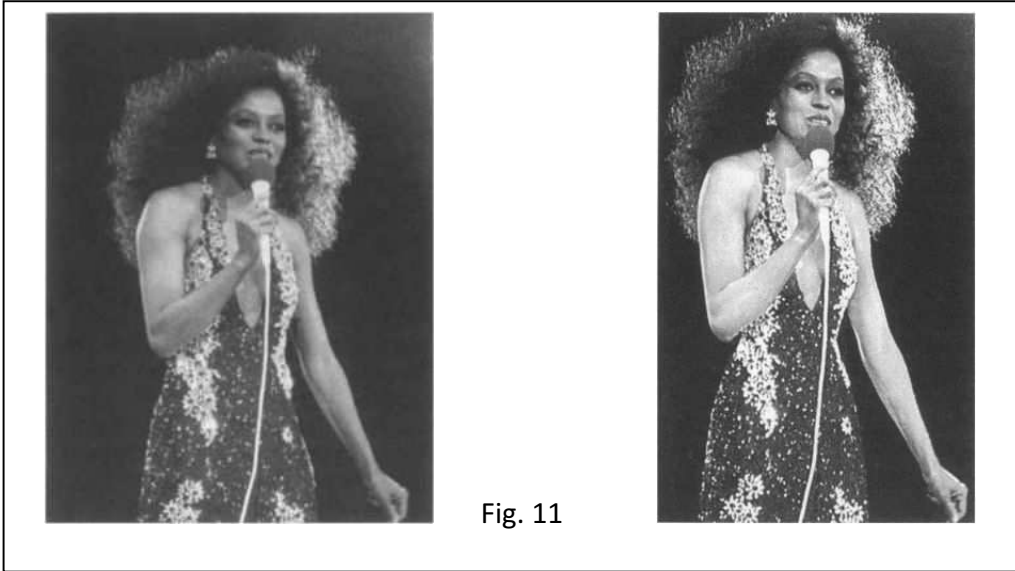
"Positive life experiences such as success and happiness are often associated with people who are thin." (Carstarphen et al., 1999: 67). Media depictions of the thin ideal are cited by women as the primary cause of their dysfunctional eating behaviours, as Carstarphen (1999) mentions. Other important sources of influences are considered to be peers and family pressure.

A very important role of the media is not only to promote thinness but also fake bodies created on a computer screen. Sometimes, women soak up the false image of thinness. "Digital manipulation," as Carstarphen (1999: 70) calls it, can stretch bones, or clone bones on a body. Mia Consalvo (see Carstarphen) observes the irony in the fact that new technology fabricates beautiful images and then labels them as "natural look" (Carstarphen, 1999: 71). According to Carstarphen, many fashion editorials promote the natural look. The best way for women to achieve that look is by using the advertised products. Moreover, the natural look is itself fake, the result of digital enhancements. Therefore, what women are trying to achieve is actually a fabrication of science and technology. Consalvo (see Carstarphen) argues that women in magazine can never be "too rich, too thin, too white." (Carstarphen, 1999: 71)

The same critic, Carstarphen (1999), mentions that physical appearance and image factors are important cultural elements. Comparing themselves to the images in the magazines, women become obsessed with their appearance, finding dissatisfaction with their own bodies, losing their self-confidence, and resorting to different diets in order to be thin.

In her study, Carstarphen (1999), analyses the way in which the image of Diana Ross was retouched (Fig. 11). She has been elongated ten percent, mentions Carstarphen (1999). Her skin has also been lightened. She definitely appears thinner, and younger. However, the changes in the image are more subtle than many advertisements in the magazines today. Yet, such manipulation alters our

perception to an important extent. Comparing Diana’s body to her own, the consumer is no longer able to identify with the real person but with the thinner version.



**2.4. Offensive Ads**



The developments in technology and communication have given rise to concerns about the distribution of ads. Some ads are offensive to women, viewing them as mere sexual objects, or inferior to men.

The following ad would be considered nowadays highly offensive to women. It appeared in the 1950s.

The Gucci ad (Fig. 13) attempts to demonstrate the place a woman has. It can be correlated with the shoes ad in the 1920s. It suggests women’s inferiority to men and their dependence.

The last item to be discussed here is the Calvin Klein ad (Fig. 14), which promotes thinness, and an unreal image. Looking at the ad, women may feel dissatisfied with their own bodies.





### 3. Conclusion

The aim of my paper has been to demonstrate that advertising has a great impact on our lives, as it sets high standards for women to achieve. Advertisements containing images which portray women influence the way in which women in real life are perceived by others and also the way in which they see themselves.

Advertising and especially advertisements, the core of ADCult, have a great impact both on men and women. Men are influenced in the sense that often certain ads make them behave in a certain way to women.

However, women are more likely to be influenced by advertisements. Women as consumers see and assess themselves according to the models in the ads. On one hand, they are convinced by the ad that buying the product will make them be just like the model. On the other hand, women are constantly pressured by society to look like the models in the ads. Photography plays a very important role in women's perception of themselves, because women look up to models whose images have been retouched and therefore impossible to attain. Because of these images, women start to undergo plastic surgeries or extreme diets.

#### Advertisements Index

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- Fig. 2: <http://www.goantiques.com/scripts/images,id,1598078.html> [May 8, 2011]
- Fig. 3: <http://popshifter.com/2009-03-30/a-loving-lasting-fragrance-iconic-scents-of-the-seventies-and-beyond/> [May 10, 2011]
- Fig. 4: <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/search?q=kitchen&page=4> [June 19, 2011]
- Fig. 5: <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/search?q=chanel&page=2> [June 19, 2011]
- Fig. 6: <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/search?q=independent> [June 19, 2011]
- Fig. 7: <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/beauty-and-hygiene-ads-1940s/58> [May 10, 2011]
- Fig. 8: <http://stellar27.blogspot.com/2011/01/birthday-beauty-dior-addict-sally.html> [May 10, 2011]
- Fig. 9: <http://www.about-face.org/goo/newten/4/six.shtml> [May 11, 2011]
- Fig. 10: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kate\\_Moss\\_Calvin\\_Klein.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kate_Moss_Calvin_Klein.jpg) [May 28, 2011]
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Fig. 12: <http://totallytop10.com/current-affairs/odd-news/top-10-incredibly-offensive-vintage-ads> [May 31, 2011]

Fig. 13: [http://www.wunrn.com/news/2010/07\\_10/07\\_19\\_10/071910\\_love.htm](http://www.wunrn.com/news/2010/07_10/07_19_10/071910_love.htm) [May 31, 2011]

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