Has Our Culture Really Changed? Advertisements Say No.

A woman getting hit; a woman with a bruised eye; a woman standing against a target with knives around her; a group of men all surrounding one barely dressed woman; what do all these have in common? They are all seen in advertising for companies like Chase and Sanborn coffee, Fluid hair salon, Louis Vuitton, and Calvin Klein; but even more, each of these pieces of advertisement imply violence or assault towards women. Though some people, like in Reichert et al findings, may use violence against women in advertisements because, “sex sells; but only if it is more shocking and more graphic than preceding campaigns” (qtd. In Capella et al, 5), or because “advertisers may feel compelled to ‘push the envelope’ and employ more shocking appeals to ‘break through the clutter’ in the future” (Capella et al, 5), it has a much greater repercussion on both women and our culture as a whole. In Kilbourne’s “Killing Us Softly IV” film she argues, “[Ads] create an environment. An environment that we all swim in as fish swim in water.” In other words, whether society likes it or not, ads affect each individual subconsciously and as a result it affects our “environment that we all swim in”, or our culture. It’s not hard to see, however, that violence and assault towards women is a very real issue in our culture and has been for decades. According to the statistics found by National Organization for Women (NOW), “In 2005, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner.” NOW also mentioned, according to National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, “women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes every year” and according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, “232,960 women in the U.S. were raped or sexually assaulted in 2006. That’s more than 600 women every day.” But why is this an issue in our culture? Why does our society and culture just accept these statistics? And why are these
statistics even **important** to begin with? There is a simple answer to these complicated questions: advertisements. In one study, in the *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, it is “tested whether notions of women as sex objects mediated associations between men’s exposure to pornography, men’s magazines, reality TV, and ASV. The more men reported exposure to these media, the stronger were their notions of women as sex objects, and the stronger their notions were of women as sex objects, the more they expressed ASV” or “attitudes supportive of violence against women” (Wright and Tokunaga, 962). Violence against women has been seen in advertisements dating back to the 1950s and for decades before then, but while aprons and housewives have become less common, violence against women in ads have not. As much as we have tried to convince ourselves that society has changed, it hasn’t and the advertisements show this through the trend of violence and objectification of women in ads which has made it commonplace in our culture.

Though advertisements may look different from the 1950s to now, the underlying message is the same. In the 1950s, women wore long, flowy dresses with high heels and perfect hair. Women looked respectable in the ads with not an obscene amount of skin showing. And while advertisements gave the sense of violence it was usually within marital relationships that they showed it. For instance, in the 1952 Chase and Sanborn coffee ad there is a woman laid over a man's lap whose hand is raised, ready to smack the woman. The woman is wearing a dress with
heels and perfectly done hair and the man is in a dress shirt, dress pants and suspenders. He is about to spank her, which is an act usually used on children who don’t behave or a pet dog who has been digging through the trash (though even today using hitting for these purposes have become frowned upon). But regardless of how spanking is used, it is violence nonetheless and for the purpose of this ad it is implying domestic abuse. The advertisement is suggesting that if a “husband ever finds out” his wife stopped looking for “fresher” coffee then he has every right to abuse her. Another example of an ad promoting violence is the 1951 Van Heusen tie advertisement. In this ad there is a man in bed with his hands behind his head, wearing a dress shirt and tie, looking down upon a woman wearing a long lengthed robe, showing barely any skin and on her knees serving him food. We can assume they are in some type of relationship because the woman is wearing a robe. If this was just a one night stand or casual hook up the woman would most likely not have a robe at his house. The ad’s text reads “show her it’s a man’s world” which is pretty straight forward in what the ad is promoting: men are more dominant than women. Though it’s not physical violence it is still abuse - mental abuse. The ad is implying that women have no purpose but to serve and be bossed around by men. This theme,
of respectably dressed women being abused in some way or another by well dressed men, is seen during the 1950s and the same yet slightly different theme is seen today as well.

One difference seen between the ads from the 1950s and now is the relationship between the woman and the man or the abuser in the ad. During the 1950s, most ads tried to imply domestic abuse - violence between a couple - rather than just a random male stranger assaulting a random woman. However, today the stranger scenario is more common in ads. One example of this is the Skyy vodka ad. In this ad a man is standing over a woman while holding in tight, aggressive looking fists, two glasses and a Skyy vodka bottle. Because his hands are both menacing looking and holding the subject of the ad (the Skyy vodka bottle) our eyes are drawn to them. From there we can see that this man, though he wears a ring on his pinky finger, does not wear a wedding ring. The woman’s hand is in the foreground of the ad which leads the eye to it and we can see a ring is on her right hand - not her wedding ring finger. It is not apparent whether the woman is married because her wedding ring finger is not shown, but in the end that doesn’t matter in a situation like this, and the ad has made that clear by omitting her wedding ring finger from the image. A man is standing over a barely dressed woman, who most likely had
no idea the man was going to stand over her because if the woman was tanning - like she appears to be doing, hence the bathing suit, sunglasses, beach, and a raised platform (like a chair) - her eyes were most likely closed. The whole image screams sexual assault, so whether the woman is married or not doesn’t matter because the man stood over her, she had no say in the matter.

Another example of this is the 2009 Relish advertisement. In this ad there are two men in officer uniforms who appear to be arresting two women. One woman’s head seems to be pulled back by the officer, while the other officer has his hand up the woman’s dress, also regarded as sexual assault. There is no indication that the women know these men, so we must assume they are strangers. Also, though it may be consensual, it is unlikely considering the officers are using force like holding one of the woman’s hands behind her back and pushing the other against the car. This ad suggests assault and rape against women is okay, and while the findings of Allen et al are, “If sexual assault is not depicted, no change in ASV can occur” (qtd. in Wright and Tokunaga, 956), the question remains, what happens when sexual assault is present? Even though there is this change in abuser from known to unknown in ads, it still causes fear in women; though now women don’t only fear the man at home like women of the 1950s did, but they also fear each male they pass because each is a potential threat.
Whether the man is known or unknown to the woman in the ad, he is always well-dressed in the advertisement. Dress shirt, suit, tie, suspenders, loafers, watches and etc are all seen on the men who act violently towards women in the ads from the 1950s to now. The Skyy vodka ad mentioned before illustrates this motif of well-dressed men. In this ad the man standing over the woman is wearing a suit with clean and shiny loafers, along with accessories like a watch and ring. Another example of this is the 2008 Duncan Quinn ad. In this ad there is a man in an expensive looking suit with a silk handkerchief in his jacket pocket holding an equally expensive looking necktie that is around a woman’s neck who is laying over a hood of a car in only her underwear. These men could interchange with the men in the ads from the 1950s who wore dress shirts, suspenders, and loafers like the man in the Chase and Sanborn Coffee ad or the man in a dress shirt and tie in the Van Heusen tie ad. However, these advertisements - the Duncan Quinn ad and the Chase and Sanborn Coffee ad or the Van Heusen tie ad - are nearly 50 years apart, so why haven’t the men in these ads styles changed between the ads?

The appearance that the advertisements are promoting for men of wealth and success suggests to men that to have control over a woman, by beating her or assaulting her, is to have
control or get control of his life. If an ad were to have a beer-bellied, hair-thinning, t-shirt and jean wearing man hitting a woman it would not be glamorous like how these advertisements want violence against women to be. The images of unfashionable, not hygienic men beating women are the poster-images for advertisements promoting organizations like the Women Foundation and the Say No to Violence Against Women movement because no one wants to look like or be like those unglamorous men. However, these ads are suggesting that just like men’s fashion in the ads have not changed from the 1950s, neither has the way they treat women or their perception of women.

Where the men in the advertisements from the 1950s to now can interchange, the women in the ads from the 1950s to now can not. Women in advertisements from the 1950s wore modest pieces of clothing that didn’t show a lot of skin. For example, the woman in the Van Heusen tie ad wore a robe that didn’t show any skin but her face, neck and hands and the woman in the Chase and Sanborn ad wore a dress that went past her knees. These characteristics of the ads promoting violence against women have changed, but the way women are treated in the ads remain the same. Women in ads today are barely dressed, or at times, not dressed at all. For example, in the Skyy vodka ad mentioned before, the woman the man is standing over is only wearing a bikini and her breasts are the main focus of her body and one of the main focuses of the picture. The fact that the woman is barely dressed while the man is fully dressed makes the situation much more threatening even though it was already menacing because he is standing over her. Another example of this is the Duncan Quinn ad mentioned before as well. Besides the fact that the man is wearing layers of clothing while the woman is only wearing underwear, the
smiling man is also strangling the women with a necktie which makes the advertisement even more alarming and the man appear even more intimidating.

It’s fair to argue that the fashion for women has changed over time and thus clothing is much tighter and less clothing overall, but advertising takes it to the extreme, leaving women in only their underwear or in nothing at all while picturing the men still fully clothed. This strategy dehumanizes the women in the ad and allows for the men to have more control and power. One study in the *European Journal Of Social Psychology* found that, “only sexually objectified women are dehumanized compared with the equally objectified pictures of male targets” (Vaes, Jeroen, Paola Paladino, and Elisa Puvia, 778) which as Kilbourne states in her film “turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step toward justifying violence against that person.” This concept is not a new idea. As Kilbourne mentions it applies to racism, homophobia and terrorism; which if we look at history these were not, and are still not, topics that usually have peace and positivity associated with them; so where does this leave women? It leaves women in the same position as they were in the 1950s and the decades before then: as nothing more than a prop and possession of men. And advertisements are saying that this is okay.

The presence of violence and assault against women in ads does not discriminate when it comes to genre of advertisement. It is seen in advertisements about cars, alcohol, food, shoes and clothing for both men and women, and many other areas. The 2009 Fluid hair salon ad shows violence and assault through a woman in a short and tight fitting dress who has a bruised eye while a man in a suit towers over her. The 2006 Jimmy Choo ad promotes this theme in their ad by alluding to murder through a woman lying in the trunk of a car with her eyes closed while a man in a suit holds a shovel. The Valentino ad suggests this theme by having a man in a suit
grabbing a woman's face so aggressively that her face is visibly squished. The 2013 Ford ad promotes this theme through a cartoon where three women are tied up and gagged in the trunk of a car in very tight, promiscuous clothing while a man in a suit sits in the front. The PETA ad shows this theme by turning a woman into a piece of meat by hanging the bloody upper half of her body next to other pieces of meat. The Old Milwaukee beer ad suggests this theme by adding text that states “free girl [comes] with every can.” Although these ads may seem different put side by side because they are selling different products, they all are the same at the core. They all display the theme of violence against women whether it’s through assault, the illusion of murder, domestic abuse, or dehumanization and if there is men in the ad they are always dressed professionally. This theme is in multiple aspects of advertising, so people are frequently exposed to the violence and objectification of women. And in the study done by Wright and Tokunaga, “men who were more frequently exposed to… men’s magazines… were more likely to perceive women as sex objects than men who were less frequently exposed to these media. And, men who were more apt to perceive women as sex objects were also more likely to agree with statements such as ‘Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force’ and ‘A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson’ (Burt, 1980). Such attitudes have been found to predict sexually aggressive inclinations and behaviors in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Hald et al., 2010)” (961). These statements, though may seem appalling, were not uncommon in the past, and, though may seem even more appalling, are not uncommon now as seen in the study. This proves the danger these advertisements put women in and the practices that are still in our culture today.
Violence against women in our culture remains a norm and something to be expected which we can thank, in part, to advertising. According to the former senior editor of *Advertising Age*, which was mentioned in “Killing Us Softly IV”, “only 8% of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain.”

Thus, the subconscious effects of these ads are far more dangerous than anyone realizes. As seen in the paragraph before, violence against women has taken over advertisements to sell a variety of products so it is not hard to find in media. And because it remains a norm in advertising it continues to be a norm in society which leads to the danger women face everyday. An example of this theme being a norm in society and a danger to women is the statistic that “out of every 1,000 rapes, 994 perpetrators will walk free” (RAINN: Rape Abuse and Incest National Network) a prime example being the Stanford Rape Case. We make up excuses for the boys that rape, assault and abuse women and girls. However, while we make excuses for the boys, we teach girls how to change themselves so maybe they won’t have to face that nightmare, to not walk around alone at night, to always have pepper spray if walking alone no matter what time of the day they are walking, to hold their drink while at a bar or party and never let it out of their sight, to wear modest clothing because if they don’t it is their fault what happens to them. We teach girls all these things but never expect the boys to change because we don’t expect the violence and assault to change. Instead advertisements keep promoting the violence, which keeps the cycle going.

According to Kilbourne’s “Killing Us Softly IV”, “the average American is exposed to over 3,000 ads every single day and will spend 2 years of his or her life watching television commercials” and because this film was made in 2010 those statistics were sure to have
increased over the last 6 years considering the increase in social media and technology over the years. Advertisements have shaped our culture simply because they are everywhere we turn: in schools, in the store, on the street, in movies, in tv shows, in music, in art, in sports stadiums, on cars and other forms of transportation, on foods and clothing, etc. Thus, it’s safe to say advertisements have an impact on our culture and society both subconsciously and consciously, and because of this, media and advertisements have the power to be used for good or evil. Unfortunately, however, they seem to be leaning towards the evil. The purpose of the study done by Wright and Tokunaga was to “identify factors that increase men’s probability of committing sexual assault” (960) and they found one: media that objectifies women. So why haven’t we changed anything in our media? Instead we seem to just be adding to the fuel by making advertisements of all types that imply violence, sexual assault, objectification of women, and degradation of women. These advertisements, like proven in the study, make violence and assault against women a common occurrence which has helped to preserve the dangerous culture for women that is present from decades before.
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Duncan Quinn (2008)  Fluid Hair Salon

Ford (2013)

PETA

Old Milwaukee Beer