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Analysis Essay

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The Distorted Perfect Image

Today, media has an enormous influence on us. It gives us knowledge, helps us to communicate and essentially connects us with the world. However, the media today has such a heavy influence on us that it changes the way we think. It tends to change our body perception. It affects our self-esteem. Media, and if we look further into us, society, change the way we act and, unfortunately, eat. When we analyze today’s media, we find that the image our media and society creates isn’t exactly realistic. Society today has an unrealistic view of body perception and media just tends to greatly exaggerate these expectations. It distorts body image far more than we can imagine.

In 2006, Dove created a 75-second video called “Evolution”. (Piper) It earned immeasurable success and laurels. Today, it has over 17 million views on You Tube. It even won two Grand Prix at Cannes; both in Cyber and Film. (Wentz, 'Evolution' Win Marks Dawn of New Cannes Era.”) But why was this advertisement so popular? Why did it seem to hit the society so hard?

The famed advertisement begins with the caption – ‘A dove film’. It starts with a woman sitting in front of a set. We can only assume that it is a photo shoot due to the set-up. We close up on her. We then hear someone in the background ask if she is ready. She nods and a spotlight shines on her. We have a good look at her. The spotlight makes her the centre of attention and emphasizes her features and flaws. She is an average looking girl. She has blemishes, redness, heavyset jaw, and pretty blue
eyes. She has shoulder length dirty blonde hair. One may see the hairstyle she has a million times in the street. She is no different from any of us.

And then begins her ‘evolution’. She is slowly transformed. It begins with covering up her blemishes. She now has flawless skin. Slowly, the imperfections that were not even noticeable when we first set eyes on the girl start fading away. Her hair is now styled to look impeccable. Her hair looks like something straight from a magazine and is definitely most girls strive for. Fake eyelashes are added and feature-defining makeup like eyeliner, bronzer, highlighter etc is applied on her face. Who knew that the ‘right’ makeup could change a person to that extend? She slightly resembles the girl we started out with.

Though her transformation so far has been drastic, it is not complete yet. Photoshop comes in. Her lips are pumped, her neck becomes longer, her nose becomes thinner, and her eyes become bigger. She looks like a completely different person now. A person would hardly be able to identify the ‘average’ girl in the beginning of the video with the girl on the billboard. After this excessive Photoshop, we see that the frame used throughout the video panes out. To our shock, this heavily modified woman is a part of a billboard promoting foundation.

At the end of the video, the message of the video is clearly implied. Dove brings about the message in its promotional video clearly. Right from the music to the placement of the girl’s picture, Dove pays close attentions to each detail. The video is played in a fast-forward mode, which makes her transformation clearly visible. The girl’s ‘distorted’ image is showcased in a billboard, and is probably viewed by thousands of people in a day. The music promised a big reveal in the end. It promises us a climax. And it doesn’t fail us. The big reveal is apparent here. The woman Dove
finishes the advertisement with is no longer the woman we started out with. The advertisement ends with the message -“no wonder our perception of beauty is distorted.”

Dove released this video to promote its ‘Real Beauty Workshop for Girls.’ Dove made this video as a part of its self esteems movement. According to Dove’s promotional website, “their vision is of a world where beauty is a source of confidence, and not anxiety” ("The Dove® Movement for Self-Esteem.") The video plays its part in raising much needed awareness about how Photoshop and makeup distort images we see in magazines, billboards and any media for that matter. It brings across the message clearly. The ‘perfect’ images we see in media aren’t entirely real.

Sadly, this is the norm with most representations of women in media today. Women, especially young girls, who do not fit that norm find themselves going to extreme measures. Advertisers take advantage of this tendency. They use this distorted image of the body in women’s heads to advertise their product. Dove, who has targeted its propaganda towards a younger age group, says that it aims to change the self-image of women.

In the same year, Dove released another video as a TV spot during the 2006 Super bowl. It shows various young girls with various issues with their body. The ages of these girls range from around 5 to 15. They all have their own issue they are insecure with. One girl hates her freckles while the other wishes to be blonde. Another girl, perhaps the oldest of the girls, is afraid that she is fat. This shows that girls today suffer from their own demons. Each of them is insecure about something others can’t even notice and may even find pretty. (ZagStudiosOnYT, "Dove True Colors Super Bowl XL Commercial." )
The message in this advertisement is explicit. Through its second advertisement Dove wants to show us that our unhealthy relationship with our body begins at a very age. As we grow older these insecurities only increase. It is heartbreaking for girls as young as five to be unhappy with something they are born with. Statistics show that 53% of American 13-year-old girls are unhappy with their body. This number rises to 78% by the time they are 17. According to the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA), young adults are more likely to be influenced by the media than children and adolescents. This is likely due to long time exposure over their childhood. (National Eating Disorder Association, “Media, Body Image, and Eating Disorders”)

The media excessively influences all of us. Magazines have this generic version of a lady on the front page. She is always tanned, skinny, curvy, has perfect skin, make up, not a hair out of place and is in general beautiful. However, these models are as real as the women in the billboard in the Dove advertisement. These models are often airbrushed and seem unreal. Most top magazines like Seventeen and Vogue contain three attributes- how to lose weight, how to apply beauty products to become more beautiful and models with airbrushed bodies. We are constantly pressurized to become the women we see in our media no matter how fake those women are.

However, can all the blame be really placed on the media? One example is when ‘Self’ Magazine released its issue with Kelly Clarkson, a famous singer, on the cover page. The article written about her focused on how confident she was in her own skin. That month’s issue was on body confidence. But there was one catch- the real Kelly Clarkson and the Kelly Clarkson on the magazine cover looked very different. The weight difference between them was visibly noticeable. When called
upon this issue, the magazine’s editor, Lucy Danziger wasn’t apologetic but was instead defensive about her magazine’s actions. She said:

“Yes, of course we do post-production corrections on our images. Photoshopping is an industry standard. Kelly Clarkson exudes confidence, and is a great role model for women of all sizes and stages of their life. She works out and is strong and healthy, and our picture shows her confidence and beauty. She literally glows from within. That is the feeling we’d all want to have. We love this cover and we love Kelly Clarkson.”

(Hartmann)

Though their issue talks about body confidence, they still felt the need to Photoshop the image. Photoshop is referred to as an, “industry standard” i.e something that is more or less required. Magazines feel the need to alter women by unreasonable proportions to make them ‘presentable’. Kelly Clarkson is undoubtedly a very beautiful and incredibly talented woman. However, she neither fits the media’s nor our society’s norm of stick thin figures. Elizabeth Perle, editor at Huffington Post High school, feels that Photoshop is not the villain. She feels that if Photoshop is completely taken away then we will be left models and performers “who are still under an enormous amount of pressure to go to enormous lengths to make their bodies look a certain way. “ (Perle ) We cannot completely blame media for the cultural issues in our society. Though men feel the pressure to an extent, there is still objectification of women in our society. Hence, our society is not blameless. The problem of poor body perception is deep rooted in our society.
In today’s world, society has its own standards for the ‘perfect’ features and body shape. The people who we consider the models of beauty probably look nothing like they do in various images in media. The woman we see in the Dove advertisement promoting foundation has features deemed ‘perfect’ by the society. She is the definition of “sexy.” She has smoldering eyes, clearly defined cheekbones, long neck, and perfect nose. However, the real woman evidently looks completely different. She doesn’t look like an unattainable beauty. It is ironic that this heavily modified image of the woman in the billboard is being used to promote a foundation. The company uses this edited image to promote its product. It creates an unrealistic expectation for women who are buying the product. It indirectly tells them that the foundation would make them look as ‘perfect’ or ‘beautiful’ as the airbrushed woman in the billboard does. She after all, has the features most women desire.

Over the course its campaign, “Real Beauty Workshop for Girls’, Dove has revolutionized the media by releasing many advertisements and TV spots. It has released many videos promoting better self-esteem in girls, especially younger girls (Ages 5-15). However, promoting better self-esteem is probably not Dove’s only goal. Due to its campaign since 2004, Dove established a positive image for itself. Though Dove itself makes beauty products, everything ranging from soaps to shampoos and conditioners, through its campaign it tells us that its products make us healthier rather than prettier. It makes a direct comparison with another beauty product in “Evolution” – a foundation. The implicit message in its campaign is very clear. Dove is not like other products. It tells us facts like they are. They appear to be with us in a fight against an industry, which is heavily criticized for creating unhealthy beauty standards. An industry it is essentially a part of. The basic purpose of an advertisement is to promote a product. And though “Evolution” is an
advertisement with a message, it serves its purpose. Dove makes sure that it makes a
mark on our minds.

Dove may or may not have an ulterior motive behind its campaign. But the
fact is that the woman in the Dove commercial is by far not the only or an extreme
eexample. According to ’Beauty Redefined’, a blog run by Jamie Kite and Lindsay Kite
who are Ph.Ds in the Study of Media and Body Image, on an average, a woman looks
at 600 Photoshopped images in a day. ("Photoshopping: Altering Images and Our
Minds.", Beauty Redefined) Most of them are modified at least as much as the one in
the Dove advertisement. Today, we have a perception of beauty in our minds. We all
have an idea of the perfect nose, hair, chin, lips etc. We envy models in magazines for
their perfect looks and figures. Young women idealize the models in magazines, the
singers in music videos and the actresses in movies. They strive to become these
unreal and airbrushed women portrayed in our society. Dove’s advertisement presents
these facts in front of us. It shows us exactly how distorted our ideal women are.
However, though media plays a huge role in shaping what our society thinks, this
norm of objectifying women and putting up fake images of men and women can’t be
completely blamed on our media. Our society and its focus on people’s superficial
exterior are also to blame. Society is ultimately the one to push women to become
what the media promotes. Society is the one to set beauty standards. It is the one
creating these expectations for women. Hence, it is ultimately up to us, the society, to
decide if we can really let this idealization of fake images continue. It is up to us to
decide if we want these ‘unrealistic’ portrayals to become a model for what we want
to become.

Works Cited


