



# Media, Objectification and Sexual Assault

We are unalterably opposed to the presentation of the female body being stripped, bound, raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered in the name of commercial entertainment and free speech.

(Brownmiller, 2013)



*Brownmiller has written extensive material on rape and sexual assault and its different affects. The quote above links the presentation of the female body in the media to commercial entertainment. In much of the media found in the United States today, women are often portrayed in these very ways: being raped tortured and even the suggestion of murder, all for the sake of capitalism. The images found throughout this paper are actual advertisements that can be found both online and in a variety of magazines, many of which portray these situations. Advertising that simulates pornographic scenes and gang rape is problematic to everyone, but these violent and forceful sexual situations become especially problematic for women who have been sexually assaulted.*

## **Introduction**

The images throughout this paper are actual advertisements found in a variety of magazines. Many people, especially women, might find these images offensive and uncomfortable to look at; how could they not? The media has been criticized for being largely responsible for causing issues with body image in many women and young girls by setting beauty standards that are far from realistic and therefore unattainable. Usually this beauty ideal in the United States is a very thin, young, attractive woman expected to be sexy, sexually available, sexually submissive and desirable (Kelly, 2003). Most women do not fit this cookie cutter definition of what the media says they are 'supposed' to be. Among women who have been victims of sexual assault, the impact of this media-imposed beauty standard is even more complex. Messages in advertisements that many times simulate pornographic scenes and portray violent and forceful sexual situations become very problematic for women who have been sexually assaulted.

## **What Others Have Said**

Ever since we were all very young, we have been bombarded with sexual images and sex, both in the media and popular culture (Kelly, 2003). Young girls learn from the get-go that to be feminine they have to be pretty and have some sort of sex appeal, while boys learn to be macho and what the ideal pretty girl looks like. There is more and more pressure in the consumer market for girls to be sexy at younger ages. Victoria's Secret's line of thongs targeted to girls ages eight to twelve is a perfect example. They are not

alone in this marketing. Target and JCPenny also carry thongs with sexual sayings on them like “eye candy” or “wink-wink” for young girls (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). Many companies have also started to make padded bras geared toward very young girls. Girls really start to associate their worth with their appearance as a result. These young children want to buy these things because that is what they see all around them on a daily basis: on TV and commercials even their toys dress like this. The fairly new popular Bratz® dolls (below) dress in revealing clothes that are very grown up for the girls playing with them. Levin & Kilbourne (2008), authors of *So Sexy, So Soon*, boldly state the “sexualized climate

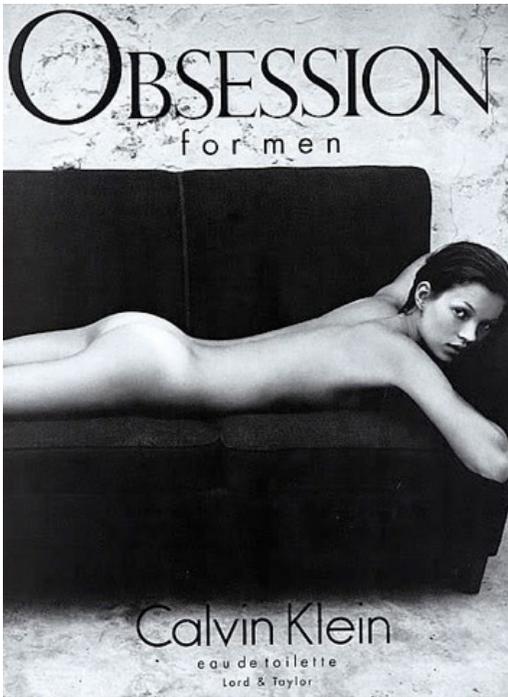


[alysasblog.wordpress.com](http://alysasblog.wordpress.com)

we describe most likely contributes to it [child sexual abuse]” (p.9). This sexual climate teaches children from an early age to associate violence with sex, and

that sex is the defining characteristic in a relationship (Levin & Kilbourne). I find this association with violence and sex and that sex is what defines a relationship to be extremely problematic. If young girls are learning that sex is really what matters in a relationship, this could lead to even more gendered domestic violence.

More and more companies use sex to sell their products, to the point where they have started to exploit sexuality and make sex out to be something that is readily available. In an interview regarding why they chose to use sexually explicit advertisements, a publicist for Bugle Boy clothing said that sometimes in the competitive market environment, the only way to stand out was reverting to “T & A” [tits and ass] (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Even though this technique may work for selling a product because it attracts the consumer’s attention, it has some very negative impacts on women in society (Jacobson & Mazur). Overtly sexual advertisements that simulate pornographic situations reinforce many stereotypes that view women as nothing more than sex objects. Frequently image-based advertisements such as Calvin Klein Obsession depict women as naked or appearing to be naked. These advertisements are telling both



[i10.photobucket.com](http://i10.photobucket.com)

women and men what is attractive and desirable; most times they are telling women what they have to look like to be attractive and telling men what women should look like to be pretty. This image of what is attractive is an unrealistic aspiration because the images of people in advertisements have been edited and combined with images of parts from other models, so much so that the finished image does not even resemble the model. Many advertisements only show parts of women, making them seem less than human. Dehumanizing and objectifying women makes it that much easier to

disparage women and can even encourage sexual harassment and violence (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Many of the images I have included here are great examples of how women have been dehumanized because only part of their bodies is shown.

Kelly (2003) reviewed several books about advertising and body image and the affects it has on women. Often situations in advertisements display and represent traditional gender roles within a culture (Kelly). In many advertisements, women are portrayed as being passive, powerless and dependent on men (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995). Having nearly naked and very



[us.jimmychoo.com](http://us.jimmychoo.com)

sexualized women repeatedly on display in advertisements blurs the lines between public and private spheres. The fashion industry displays female images that portray scenes of violence. A beautiful woman wearing a product and then killing her or bringing harm to her is a common theme that often appears in the selling of women's clothing and perfume. For example, the Jimmy Choo advertisement suggests that the man is going to kill the woman and bury her in the hole he is digging. The constant display and atmosphere these advertisements create is a contributing factor to several social issues such as sexual harassment, eating disorders, rape and low self-esteem, to name a few (Wolf, 1991). The images become very important and fundamental to a woman's feelings of self-worth because in many of the advertisements, women are constantly told that they are objects that need to be fixed and improved, primarily for the benefit of men (Kelly, 2003).

I find this to be true in my own life. I remember when I was younger looking at women in magazines and thinking that I was never going to look like them, that they were far prettier than I was ever going to be. The images become something that many women compare and hold themselves to.

Naomi Wolf (1991), author of *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used against Women*, looks at what has been defined as beauty and how it has changed. She starts off saying how women have come a long way in assuming careers and acquiring an education. However, Wolf argues that the obstacle preventing women's complete equality is the socially and culturally constructed ideals of beauty that women strive for regardless of how unrealistic these ideals are. Many women in the United States feel actual hatred towards their bodies, are obsessed with their physical appearance, and are scared to age. They do everything in their power to preserve a youthful appearance, from purchasing expensive creams to pursuing more extreme measures such as cosmetic surgery (Wolf, 1991).

In addition to what is considered beautiful, Wolf (1991) addresses the sexual aspect of beauty, sexual discovery, and liberation that many women are just now realizing for themselves. This link between beauty and sexuality is, according to Wolf, a result of "beauty pornography," described as the sexualized positions women are positioned in: in advertisements with their eyes closed and with a look that implies they are

close to orgasm. The idea that, in the public's eyes, women have a sexuality and sexual desires is still relatively new. This attacks the new and vulnerable sense of sexuality they have. Wolf states that beauty pornography makes the claim that the women's beauty is their sexuality; what is beautiful is ever changing from one time period to another. These beauty ideals have morphed into standards of acceptable behavior and appearance rather than what is actually beautiful. For example, the beauty ideal for attractive women is to be small and timid. In reality, these ideals make women passive.

Wolf (1991) describes overly sexualized, almost pornographic, advertisements similar to the ones presented later in this paper. She refers to these images as being designed rape scenes, saying that some advertisements display rape scenes that have been glorified to seem almost desirable. This is harmful because it lowers women's self-esteem and represses women's sexuality (Wolf). I am particularly interested in how women who are sexual assault survivors interpret designer rape sequences manufactured in image-based media. If these scenes have become something that is desirable, how do these women feel

having been forced in that situation which was very much undesired?

In 1987 researchers Schechter, Schwartz, and Greenfeld conducted a case study with two young women who had been sexually assaulted and then developed an eating disorder or had one worsen. The researchers looked for similarities and any connections between the two. Sexual assault has been known to cause the survivor to have feelings of guilt, anxiety and inadequacy, as well as loss of control and a distorted body image. Often the survivor feels disgusted with their own body. The first participant developed anorexia nervosa lasting one year after her sexual assault. She reported her determination to lose weight and her "worry about having an unattractive and bloated appearance" (p. 315). The researchers stated the participant thought that she was obese and unattractive, and the only way to fix that was to lose weight. The participant limited her caloric intake to about 200 calories a day and would exercise excessively (Schechter et al, 1987).

In the same study (Schechter et al), a second participant had struggled with an eating disorder prior to being sexually assaulted. She had similar feelings of disgust with her body as well as poor body image and self-esteem

before she was assaulted. However, after surviving the assault, these feelings intensified. She became even more obsessed with her diet and exercise. The second participant struggled with the idea that she was somehow responsible for the incident. In both cases the women felt significant guilt and had distorted body images. Sexual assault many times involves extreme violence and humiliation which can invoke a loss of control. These women tried to regain that control of their lives by changing and controlling their bodies (Schechter et al).

This research shows how these two participants' body image changed after they were sexually assaulted. If these participants both felt an increased distorted body image, I think that seeing incredibly thin and attractive women in advertisements could also worsen their body images and self-esteem after such an experience.

It is no coincidence that a woman's self-worth has been tied to the images women see in the media, because these images are difficult to escape, according to Ariel Levy (2005), author of *Female Chauvinistic Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Levy argues that raunch culture is a part of everyday culture and there is no escaping it. The idea that women have been sexually liberated and

“the feminist project has been achieved” (p. 3) is everywhere from the media to what young girls wear. However, Levy argues that women have not been sexually liberated in this sense. Many people that Levy talked to and interviewed shared feelings that women now had the “right” to look at magazines like *Playboy* and partake in the popular culture of which men have always been a part. Levy differentiates that women are simply mimicking what popular culture tells them is sexually liberating instead of figuring out for themselves what they want from sex and their sexuality. According to Levy, what women think is sexually liberating for them is really just sexy and beneficial for men. I tend to agree with her. Take a look at what our society deems sexy and attractive: many times men benefit from it, whether it is a skirt so short you can almost see the woman's butt, or clothing that is revealing other body parts. While I do think that women can wear these and it should really be their choice, I believe that most women wear them because societies -- and men -- find it attractive. Women wear these revealing clothes so men will find them attractive.

The media and much of popular culture tell women that strippers and pornography is sexy. It tells women that

they need to imitate a stripper or an adult film star in order to be sexually desirable, particularly to men, a narrative that reinforces heteronormativity. Levy's (2005) claim is illustrated by exercise classes such as "cardio striptease". Adult film performer Jenna Jameson has modeled for an Abercrombie & Fitch brand targeted towards teens. Positive role models for young girls, such as Olympic athletes, have posed nude in magazines like *Playboy* and *For Him*. This reiterates to women that being sexy and desirable is what they need to strive for most. In Levy's book, she mentions Susan Brownmiller, an author and founder of the New York chapter of Women against Pornography. The group brought people to strip clubs and porn shops to raise awareness about the pornographic construction of women (Levy, 2005, p. 60-1).

People and especially women argue that it is their choice to act the way they do. For example, in movies like *Girls Gone Wild* some women argue that this raunchy behavior is fun and feels sexy. Joe Francis, the founder of *Girls Gone Wild*, in which young girls have been videotaped flashing their breasts and butts or making out with other girls (among other things), said it is provocative for men while it allowed

women to let loose and be free to express themselves. Many women justify the recording of the *Girls Gone Wild* movies because it is happening whether it is recorded or not (Levy). Many women say they choose what they wear, and that men finding it attractive has nothing to do with it. Stop to think: it is mostly men who run the fashion industry and create the clothes that these women wear. I think it is difficult to say that women really get to choose.

### **Media, Objectification, and Sexual Assault**

While scholars (Jacobson & Mazur, 1995; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Levy, 2005; Schechter et al, 1987; Wolf, 1991) have raised very valid points and arguments for why and how these advertisements are harmful to women and girls in general, what about the 17.7 million women living in the United States who have been victims of rape, not to mention the others who have been sexually assaulted (RAINN, 2009)? Many are unaware that these overly sexualized advertisements could re-victimize these women on a daily basis.

Advertisements like Calvin Klein Jeans (below) can be very problematic

for someone who is a survivor of rape or any sexual assault. The positioning of the men in the advertisement is dominant and takes up space. They overpower the woman in the image, who seems to be almost naked. The men take up a good portion of the image, while you cannot even see the whole woman and she takes up almost no space at all. She can do nothing to stop what is happening around her, presumably because their jeans make them so attractive.



Additionally, there are three men to just one woman, analogous to portraying a gang rape. For someone who has been assaulted and had no control of what was happening to her, reading this image could bring up painful memories of the assault whether they are conscious of it or not.

Advertisements like these are also problematic because survivors of such sexual assault already feel powerless; the advertisements reiterate and enforce

that this is how they are supposed to feel and act (Jacobson, 1995). Veselka's (1998) "The Collapsible Woman: Cultural Response to Rape and Sexual Abuse" talks about how society sets women up and tells them how they are "supposed" to feel after such an incident. Much of those expectations include feeling dirty and powerless. Again, advertisements like the Calvin Klein Jeans and the Dolce & Gabbana brand (below) enforce a reaction: that women are helpless and at the mercy of men (Veselka). It's disturbing that both Calvin Klein and Dolce & Gabbana utilize the gang rape scenario in their advertising because it demonstrates how frequently this theme is used. Both of these brands are major popular brands that people are familiar with.



<http://whoareweintheend.blogspot.ca/2011/12/sex-sells-so-buy-it.html>

While the next advertisement does not portray a violent gang rape, the potential is presented. It conveys the

message to women where they belong: beneath men -- as well as communicates what is attractive. The SKYY advertisement shows a woman lying on her back wearing a very small bikini that is nearly exposing her breasts. Meanwhile, the man in the image is nicely dressed in a suit and is standing above the woman with a very strong stance. She is positioned under him in a submissive pose. There is a focus on his genitals as if this is as equally desirable to the vodka. In my experience both looking at advertisements and working



[alankratz.blogspot.com/](http://alankratz.blogspot.com/)

at a liquor store, a mostly naked woman is used to sell just about any type or brand of liquor. A half-naked or naked body is usually positioned next to the

bottle. Some models are sucking provocatively on a piece of fruit or the bottle itself, invoking images that are analogous to oral sex. Many are similar to the SKYY advertisement shown here, but some even further push female sexual objectification boundaries.

This SKYY advertisement, along with the Calvin Klein and Dolce and Gabbana advertisements, could elicit repressed memories of a sexual assault because in the pictures the man seems to have all the power and control, while the woman has none. This more often than not is how a sexual assault plays out. A sexual assault survivor could be reminded of how powerless she was against what happened to her. The image the advertisement provokes makes the assault happen again and again.

The message that is sent by these advertisements is the idea that women are here for the pleasure of men. Levy (2005) characterizes this phenomenon in what she calls raunch culture, arguing that women choose to act and dress in this provocative manner. But, she argues, do women choose this raunchy behavior or are there many other contributing factors that impose such behaviors on women, the constant parade of sexualized women being the

most pervasive? The revealing clothing and flashing of their bodies is primarily for men's enjoyment. When women are represented like this they are nothing more than objects for men to enjoy.

The idea that women are meant for male gaze could be problematic for sexual assault survivors. Many times after being assaulted, the victims struggle with problems of feeling disgusted with their own bodies. Many have issues with body image and in general do not feel attractive, for anyone's gaze (Schechter, 1987). As a result of this hatred and disgust towards their bodies, many women develop an array of different eating disorders. Wolf (1991) raises the question that if sexual assault can result in these feelings of self loathe, do images that mirror assault and invade their sexual privacy have a similar impact, since they could re-victimize and do further harm to these survivors)? While women who have not been assaulted may still struggle with similar issues, it may be intensified among women who have been violated. Despite this magnified feeling of degradation, media still infuse repeated messages that women need to be attractive for men. Many times after being sexually assaulted, it may be more difficult to trust or be intimate with another man because of the violation of

trust a woman feels, which is problematic when there are images all over that enforce the idea that women should be sexual with men.

The advertisement for Mentos gum is another good example of ways product marketing sexualizes women. The advertisement is for gum and yet the advertisement includes almost naked women removing her last piece of clothing. While this ad may not come right out with messages about having sex and what women are expected to be and do; it is a constant reminder that women are and should be sexy. There is no need for the naked woman; she has nothing to do with the product at all.



[www.adweek.com/adfreak/](http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/)

This could be similar to the Bugle Boy publicist who talked about how sometimes you just have to revert to using sex to sell a product (Jacobson, 1995). It is one more way in which Levy's raunch culture is on display for everyone to see. To women and especially a survivor, this constant

reminder to be sexy and sexual all the time is exhausting. Moreover, feeling sexy is not always the easiest thing when you hate your body.

The advertisement for the PlayStation® Vita, a hand held gaming device, is pushing a selling point that the device has buttons on both sides of it. The slogan is “touch both sides for added enjoyment.” The image to accompany this slogan is a mannequin with four breasts, two in the front and back, so that the gamer (overwhelmingly males) can touch breasts on both sides of a woman.



[www.kulfoto.com](http://www.kulfoto.com)

Schechter (1987) confirms that after being sexual assaulted many women are left feeling inferior and inadequate as a result of the assault. This advertisement bluntly gives the message to women that two breasts apparently are not enough. Not only are their breasts not enough, but all that matters is their body. Women who have been violated

already have problems with their own bodies and not feeling like they are good enough (Schechter, 1987). Advertisements like the PlayStation® Vita sell a product that is unrelated to sex and gender, yet these advertisements act as a reminder and confirmation to women that they are gazed upon and objectified.

The final advertisement I examine is for the KIT KAT candy bar. I chose this ad because the sexuality is blunt and not implied as it was in some of the other advertisements. The KIT KAT advertisement is another example of beauty pornography in which the



[24.media.tumblr.com](http://24.media.tumblr.com)

woman in the image is in a sexual position close to orgasm, with her eyes shut and mouth open (Wolf, 1991). To a woman who is a survivor of sexual assault, this is problematic because it is very sexual, telling them they are supposed to be sexual. There are many more advertisements that use this technique to sell products. Sexually

assaulted women seek to distance themselves from sexual imagery that provokes sexual activity.

### **What now?**

All of these advertisements have a repeating theme: the sexualized image of women and their sexuality. This is harmful to women. While some women argue that performing their sexuality can be powerful, and in some ways it is, the sexuality portrayed in advertisements objectifies and degrades women. Women are entitled to have their own sexuality; however the sexuality that many are experiencing falls within men's institutions and power (Wolf, 1991). In other words, men decide how and what acting out this sexuality means. This sexuality in many ways is primarily for men's benefit and their desires as opposed to women's empowerment. For women who have been victims of sexual assault and therefore had their reality altered drastically, these pervasive text and media-produced sexualized advertisements can serve as a constant reminder of sexual violation and the sexual expectation that society imposes. Women who have survived sexual assault struggle to regain any kind of normalcy in their lives, from dealing

with altered views about themselves and their own bodies to the other people, particularly men, in their lives. The case study mentioned previously is just one example of how someone's body image is changed after being assaulted and their attempts to fix that image. One commonality to the advertisements critiqued here is that they all depict images that are often viewed as traditional beauty in women. Like fashion models, the images are of women who are all very thin, young and look desirable. This is partly the work of the advertisement companies, but this is also what our culture deems as attractive. Since there is nothing left to the imagination in these advertisements, women receive a narrow, distorted picture of what to compare themselves to physically. They see very clearly what society sanctions as attractive and desirable. Since many women do not look like this, it reduces their feelings of self-worth, especially among sexual assault survivors already dealing with a problematic body image (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

Women Against Pornography adopted a slogan coined by Robin Morgan that I found very fitting: "Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice" (Levy, 2005, p.68). Much of the literature I have read makes

references about how the advertisements simulate pornography and rape scenes. This kind of advertisement is all around us. It is difficult if not impossible to turn off, and even though the advertisements themselves are not totally porn, they simulate it. About one in three women experience some kind of sexual assault

in the United States. Media's constant reminder of rape culture is all around us, becoming a normalized part of our society. However "normal" it is, it is very harmful to women, especially assault survivors who are re-victimized and forced to be reminded of their horrible experience.

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