The Dismemberment of Women in Advertising: 
Is the Manipulation Ethical?

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Abstract

From lawnmowers to purses, fast food to sporting events, the notion that “sex sells” has had a long history in everyday advertising and has manifested itself into the lives of everyday consumers. This is nothing new; from the 1932 Lucky Strike cigarette ad in which a man smoking a cigarette is pictured standing over a woman with her head covered by cloth to the 1970 Mr. Legg ad that shows a man resting his foot on a woman’s detached head, the use of hyper sexuality, objectification and dismemberment has been around for the greater part of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

With such a deeply ingrained recent history in advertising, now more than ever major advertisers are consulting female bodies (whether they use only parts of women’s bodies or just their silhouettes) and manipulating them to the point of dehumanization.

Is the dismemberment and objectification of women in consumer-focused advertising ethical? Is the manipulation and use of women’s body parts in visual conjunction with consumer objects effective? Furthermore, does the dismembering of women in advertisements create a culture that objectifies women as objects or does the dismemberment merely equate a product with female sex appeal?

For the purpose of this paper, photo manipulation in advertising refers to the dismemberment of women’s bodies by using only body parts in the
advertisement instead of the entire entity of the female whether by cropping, photoshopping or staging. The ethical component of my paper will question whether dismembering women in advertisements creates a culture that objectifies women as objects or whether the dismemberment merely equates a product with female sex appeal.

I will examine American consumer and gender culture to gain insights on these questions and subsequently examine the possible long-term effects of such advertising tactics.

Text

One does not need to look long nor hard to find an advertisement that features only a portion of a woman’s body either in conjunction with or for the promotion of a consumer good. In fact, it is safe to say that after gazing through the latest publication of a magazine, surfing through blog and social media sites online, or walking down a city street, a person will have already viewed multiple manipulated advertisements.

The effects of being bombarded with dismembered images of women for consumer goods has deeper implications that to just “buy this” or “invest in that” because, as Debra Merskin argues in her book *Media, Minority and Meaning: A Critical Introduction*, “advertising is one of the most powerful relaters of cultural values that we have in modern world.”¹ This imagery, manipulated by cropping, photoshopping and/or staging, creates an objectification that represents women

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only as parts, or rather, as bits and pieces. If such statements are true, what does this say about our cultural values?

Objectification tactics in advertising have been used long before the now-popular “dismemberment of women” tactic. Dehumanizing a group of people in order to create an enemy incapable of feelings, love and life has been used for centuries in propaganda during times of war. The manifestation of female objectification is merely a transformed version of the lifeless and emotionless “object” (i.e. the enemy) that can be used and abused from the wartime propagandas of the past.

Merskin further argues that when an advertisement dismembers a person and reduces them to merely chest, butt, legs or lips it effectively dehumanizes them. “It’s no longer a person with feelings and ideas and interests and family and love. That person is an object.”

Illustration 1, a BMW car advertisement, exemplifies this concept. The woman who the man is presumably having intercourse with has become an object: he can own it, operate it, show it off and lust after it. When a picture of a car covers the women’s face it has now merged both the meaning of a car and a woman’s body. They become one of the same. Objects, by definition, can be bought or sold. Once her head is detached from the body, her body itself

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2 Ibid
4 Ibid
5 Ibid
6 Ibid
becomes a material object that he owns (like a car) and thus she loses her sense of self, value and wholeness.

Opposing sides continue to debate whether using female parts as dismembered objects has lasting psychological and cultural impacts or if it purely reflects the creative license that is (debatably) the “art” of advertising. In *Sex in Advertising: Perspectives on the Erotic Appeal*, Reichert and Lambaise describe the experience of the modern media consumer: “Americans desperately wish to believe they think for themselves... Simply put, consumers must believe ads do not work in order for them to work successfully.”  

But, are people really untouched? In men, it can create a disillusioned sense of what an entire and natural female body is and can make it difficult for them to effectively translate women’s body parts into a whole human. In women, dismemberment objectification has been linked to clinical depression, “habitual body monitoring”, decreased self-worth and eating disorders.

The objectification theory suggests that sexual objectification of women is due to the greater scrutiny and evaluation of female bodies in comparison to male bodies. In a 2012 study published in the *European Journal of Social Science*.
Psychology, research showed that consumers should not be too quick to blame men for visually dismembering women’s bodies into parts.\textsuperscript{12} Of 227 undergraduate students in the study, participants were shown 48 full-body images of both sexes.\textsuperscript{13} Then, they were shown the original images again alongside a version of the full-body images whose sexualized body parts had been slightly altered.\textsuperscript{14} The results showed that both women and men’s brains visually processed a female body in parts but a male body as a whole.\textsuperscript{15} With studies suggesting the inherent mental process of dismembering women it becomes more apparent why advertisers result to body parts and sexualization.

Illustration 2, an advertisement for moisturizing crème, uses two different body parts (knees and feet) to transform two objects into a third object: breasts. With kneecaps as the breasts and the large toe of the foot as the nipples, cropping and the use of angles manipulate this photo to an extreme extent. Knees and feet are not typically viewed as overly sexual body parts, but in combining the three via manipulation the advertisers have managed to trick the consumer into thinking that it is a sexual body part.

In this example, the dismembering of the female body to create a fictional third object diminishes the human nature attributed to a whole female.\textsuperscript{16} Even though there are not real breasts pictured in this advertisement, it still dismembers the female body and eludes consumers to equate breasts to a

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid
  \item \textsuperscript{16} SUPRA note 8
\end{itemize}
consumer product. In turn, this advertisement turns breasts into an object that can be owned, bought and sold\textsuperscript{17} in a similar way the moisturizing crème can be owned, bought and sold.

Carol Stabile, director of the Center For The Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon, argues that it is in the public’s hands to stop dismemberment objectification in advertising.\textsuperscript{18} In order to stop advertising agencies from dismembering and objectifying women in manipulated photos, people must use an economical argument.\textsuperscript{19} If a majority of people refuses to buy products or support companies who dismember in advertisements, companies will have no choice but to nix the practice.\textsuperscript{20} Stabile acknowledged possible moral arguments against objectifying women but continued by suggesting that companies, motivated by money, are more likely to discontinue female dismemberment if it means a reduction in profits.\textsuperscript{21}

Although dismemberment in advertising has received a large amount of negative attention, there are others who strongly believe that objectification and dismemberment can serve a positive role in establishing cultural values towards women. One influential example is Cameron Diaz who was quoted in an interview with The Sunday Times that objectification is healthy and empowering and claims that every woman, at some time, wants to be objectified.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{17} SUPRA note 4
\textsuperscript{18} Stabile, C. (2012, November 29). Personal interview.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid
Nicki Minaj, an influential figure who has risen to fame by capitalizing on her sexuality through explicit lyrics and extreme forms of fashion, released her 2011 *Pink Friday* album with an overly manipulated photo of her as the album cover. The photo, illustration 3, shows Minaj dismembered without arms, with overly elongated legs and enlarged breasts. Accurately resembling a Barbie Doll, Minaj creates the illusion that as a doll, her parts (in this case, arms) can be detached, her legs stretched to a Barbie-like perfection and her head reduced as to take up less space. The emphasis then becomes her sexual body parts, those being her legs and breasts. She’s using the objectification and dismemberment of her body as a means to further her financial and social success.

In western society money means power, and thus Nicki Minaj uses dismemberment to create something different and unique that consumers want to buy, while at the same time empowering herself as a woman through financial gain. This is the goal and role of advertising: making money while being able to play off of the already established tactic of dismemberment.

Another example that utilizes dismemberment and translates it into female empowerment are the 2005 Nike Women advertisements (Illustration 4).23 A *Bloomberg Businessweek* article from 2005 applauded Nike’s efforts to include all body types in their advertising campaign: “…This ad shows a greater

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/20/cameron-diaz-every-woman-wants-to-be-objectified_n_2164965.html#slide=974407

spirit of inclusiveness, while maintaining an air of aspiration.” In an *Uristocrat* online blog forum the ad in Illustration 4 received 902 likes and 26 of 34 comments responded positively to this sort of dismemberment for empowerment. As a matter of fact the majority of individuals who commented were women who found the ads to be an accurate portrayal of what a “real” woman’s butt looked like. Some commenters even went as far as to say that the ads represented them as athletic women, with the same butt or body type as the dismembered model.

Clothing designer Norma Kamali has also taken a similar route, using objectification as a means to empower “real” women by allowing them to submit photos of their body parts with empowering phrases. *The Stop Objectification* project is an “interactive website where users can submit photos of their favorite body parts and include an empowerment statement ‘that lets the world know what makes you more.’” It turns what is viewed heavily as a “negative” part of the ad industry as something enabling positive imagery through the very methods

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27 SUPRRA note 22
used by the companies that have dismembered women for the last two centuries in advertisements.28

In illustration 5 a woman took a photo of her favorite physical attribute, her breasts, and has used them to advertise what makes her more: her PhD in neuroscience. In an advertising culture that often objectifies women’s breasts and exploits them to sell commercial goods, this advertisement is a protest that allows women to take control of their dismembered sexual body parts and equate them with their achievements as a whole woman. This dismemberment, in turn, is a way of taking back the power and using objectification to empower instead of objectify.

Given the positive and negative arguments regarding female dismemberment in advertising, the question of what it means now and for the future of our culture remains. Illustration 6, a photo of a Pinterest user’s “healthy” pin board, is a current example of how dismembering and objectifying women’s bodies is not just a one-sided advertising practice anymore. This online pinboard shows the multitude of images that advertise a sculpted butt or toned abs and are created and distributed online via social media sites like Tumblr and Pinterest. These display how many people are perpetuating female dismemberment on a large scale and show a possible side effect of the generations of people who have been consuming dismembered and objectified advertisements for all, if not most of, their lives.

The debate on if dismemberment via photo manipulation in advertising is ethical will likely continue far into the future. This paper examined female dismemberment in advertising’s cultural, psychological and sociological effects through current interviews, scientific studies and online resources. It is clear that dismemberment is a continuous and ever-changing practice in American culture that will influence generations of people for decades- or perhaps event centuries- to come.
Illustration 5

HAS A PH.D. IN NEUROSCIENCE

Illustration 6
List of Interviewees

1) Deborah Morrison
   Chambers Distinguished Professor of Advertising
   School of Journalism and Communication
   University of Oregon
   Date of interview: November 29, 2012
   (541) 346-1797

2) Carol Stabile
   Professor
   Department of English, School of Journalism and Communication, Department of Women's Studies
   University of Oregon
   Date of interview: November 29, 2012
   (541) 346-5524

3) Sarah Bahnson
   PhD Student, Marketing Instructor
   Lundquist College of Business
   University of Oregon
   Date of interview: November 28, 2012
   (541) 346-9080
   Source not quoted in paper, but provided helpful information with researching.