The Dehumanization of Women in
SKYY Vodka Advertisements
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Abstract
This paper is going to explain why women are dehumanized in advertising, specifically SKYY Vodka advertisements. Next, the paper is going to prove that women are discriminated against in the advertisements. After that, it will uncover how SKYY Vodka advertisements portray a certain lifestyle in their advertisements; followed by how advertisements might be more accepted if they were made by and for women. The paper will then explore liberating advertisements in comparison to the demeaning advertisements created for SKYY Vodka. Next the paper will uncover possible problems that may arise if children see these advertisements. Lastly, the paper will illustrate how SKYY Vodka advertisements (or any alcohol advertisements), and law intertwine.
People have become increasingly dehumanized over the years; most specifically in the advertising world. Women especially have been a target the entire time, and they keep becoming more and more degraded. Women are merely objects in advertisements. In the beginning, women were widely used as objects in cigarette ads; but as times have changed, this has become more prevalent in many other ads as well. These include food advertisements, TV advertisements, but specifically for the purposes of this paper, alcohol advertisements. It is very clear after initial research, that the women used in SKYY Vodka advertisements are extremely sexualized and as stated before, mere objects. Their bodies are fragmented into parts, rather than represented as human beings. Dr. Kevin Williams of Shepherd University has stated: “bodies are not just people, but signifying vehicles, that express the social construction of desires and needs” (2009). This statement captures the essence of this paper. Women’s bodies are used like Williams states, as “vehicles” (2009) in order to grab consumer’s attention to get them to buy certain products. The makers of SKYY Vodka use women’s bodies as a way of engulfing consumers’ desires, ultimately convincing them to buy the products.

The reasons women are objectified in advertisements.

Sex sells. Although this statement is very short it has certainly been proven. It is becoming more and more popular for advertisers to use sex as a “vehicle” (Williams, 2009) into gaining customers for different products. People are surrounded with over 3000 advertisements a day (Larson, 2009) ergo, they are bound to see extremely sexual, and at times indecent advertisements. Whether they are in the checkout line at a supermarket, watching primetime television, or reading a magazine, a great number of the advertisements that people are presented
with are highly sexualized. People often wonder why women are used as objects in advertisements but it is very simple; the female body attracts people and in turn influences them into buying certain products. Stereotypically it is thought that men are especially interested in buying things that are advertised using the female body; and because of this fact, Blair makes the point that women have to continually look at themselves through (stereotypical), men’s eyes (1994). This is a great point. Women’s bodies are used in order to feed into men’s and some women’s desires of course, but only for this purpose. Why else would it be necessary for half naked women to be the stars of certain advertisements? Although SKYY advertisements degrade women, the company is smart in who they choose to advertise to. They are aware that people are going to buy products once they see their sexy advertisements. Blair states “…woman are encouraged to put on permanent appearances, to constantly aim at seduction, and while this may allow women to gain external power - be it social, economic, or sexual - it also can cause inner turmoil…” (1994). This is so true, although women may feel powerful or liberated for “starring” in said advertisements, at the end of the day, they realize how they are really being viewed which can be damaging to them and their self esteem. Blair goes on to state that “…society has defined femininity in terms of a grammar of body - lips, breasts, legs - parts that are so interchangeable and genetic that woman herself become interchangeable and in this sense no longer exit…” (1994). Blair only reiterates the fact that women are nothing more than body parts. When they are fragmented into different body parts, they lose sight of themselves as women; as *people.*
**Women are discriminated against in SKYY Vodka advertisements.**

In regards to SKYY Vodka, and why that company chooses to use such racy pictures in their advertisements, Dorflinger states in his Discourse *The Power of Words and Images: A Discourse Analysis of Vodka in Advertisements* “yet, the sexual elements in the ads must not be disregarded; it is therefore possible of interpreting the ads not as sexist, but as sexy. The ads address a society that is more liberal, open minded, emancipated and interested in the topics that used to be taboos. Instead of discriminating gender, the company is simply incorporating these elements in their advertising because obviously “sex sells” (2006). Dorflinger is correct in stating that sex sells, but the advertisements do in fact discriminate gender, (specifically women). In a SKYY Vodka advertisement, there is a picture of a women lying on the ground scantily clad, with a man standing over her in a straddling position. The position, in which that man is standing signifies that he is in charge, specifically over the woman. The fact that he is in charge belittles the women, and indicates that she is some sort of property to him. This fact proves that women are discriminated against in SKYY vodka advertisements. After studying many SKYY advertisements, it is evident that men are often physically positioned higher than women are in the advertisements. This is so, because either the women are in a lower position than the men are; or, men’s whole bodies are seen in the advertisements, while perhaps only a certain body part of women is visible in that same advertisement.

**SKYY Vodka Advertisements portray a certain lifestyle.**

It is very evident that the SKYY Vodka Company likes to portray a certain lifestyle in its advertisements. The different images illustrate a very high class lifestyle, which is signified in the pictures by the fancy clothing the people wear and the various settings the people are a part
of; whether they be on a fancy beach, or what looks to be an extremely expensive condo overlooking a cityscape. The images also indicate a high class “club” lifestyle which is also represented through the outfits the people are wearing, and the fact that some of the people in the images appear to be drunk, as if to say “it’s been a long night”.

Cortese states in his book *Provocateur*, “satisfaction is guaranteed with a purchase. Not only do advertising images try to sell a product by associating it with particular socially efficacious characteristics, but also they sell nothing less than an expensive worldview, a lifestyle and system of values…” (2004). Cortese is accurate in stating this, because this is exactly what SKYY Vodka tries to do in its advertisements, which again, is to exemplify high status situations and lifestyles. Dorflinger is correct when he states “the backgrounds in SKYY ads usually incorporate lush settings like expensive hotels with swimming pools filled with Caribbean-coloured waters, apartments or penthouses in the upper floors of buildings, with a view on a beautiful skyline, theatres and operas, expensive bars, etc. But the ads not only connote wealth but also sex and adventure. Even while lingering around pools men always wear expensive suits while women either wear swimsuits displaying a lot of tanned skin or expensive and seductive clothes or dresses. The female models defiantly serve as eye-catchers creating a feeling of sexual desire and lust” (2006). This observation is completely perfect. Dorflinger only reiterates that fact that SKYY Vodka advertisements *do* in fact portray a certain lifestyle.

**How advertisements are received when made by and for women.**

Since SKYY Vodka advertisements are extremely dehumanizing to women, perhaps women do not have much of a say in creating them. Perhaps the campaign team consists only of
men. But, this is probably not very likely because in this day in age, it is very normal for a woman to have a steady company job, for example in the advertising world, but why would women want to lower their value in order to simply sell a product? It is definitely possible that women play a huge role in creating SKYY Vodka advertisements, but again, why lower the value of women by belittling them in the advertisements? It would be very wrong and stereotypical to say that because of the nature of these advertisements, men were the only ones in charge of creating them. This would be very wrong, because perhaps the women (if any), that were a part of this SKYY Vodka team were in the advertising business to simply sell a product? This is very possible. The women on this campaign might have disregarded the fact that these advertisements are dehumanizing to women, because the only thing on their minds is whether or not these products get sold.

Regardless to these facts, some may still argue that because the advertisements are obscene, and put a negative connotation on women, that men had to have created them. This very well may be true, but just think…what if women were the sole creators to these advertisements; kind of a “by women, for women,” situation? Jean Grow talks about the different roles that gender plays in the advertising world in her article: The Gender of Branding: Early Nike Women’s advertising a Feminist Antenarrative. Although Nike and SKYY Vodka are two completely different companies that sell two completely different products, the same principles apply for selling any product. Grow states, “In the early 1990s, a female point of view was rarely reflected in advertising. While the creative team and Nike executives had the same objective of increasing market share among women, each had strongly differing views about how
to achieve this. In the end, women's advertising ultimately increased Nike's market share among women” (2008). Regardless to the actual team that makes up the SKYY Vodka advertising campaign, the advertising images speak for themselves. It appears that because SKYY Vodka advertisements are so negative toward women that maybe women did not have a huge say in how they were portrayed in the advertisements, because a lot of women do not want to be portrayed in such an obscene manner. SKYY Vodka should take the approach that Nike took, in letting the women take over a part in the advertising campaign (2008). Maybe if women took over only a part of the campaign, then there would be a more equal position between the men and the women in the advertisements. No one should be dehumanized, men included. Maybe SKYY Vodka could apply a more “liberated” feel to the advertisements in order for men and women to have equal parts in the advertisements. Instead of women being lower on the advertisements than the men (signifying that the men are in control), they should be at equal height. Grow stated that when women created advertisements for Nike (for other women), their market increased (2008). If SKYY Vodka were to take this approach when creating its advertisements, its market will increase as well.

Advertisements that empower women.

It is very evident that different advertising campaigns have different means of presenting their products. Whether they use different images, different models, or even different settings for any advertising medium, there is always a slight discrepancy from campaign to campaign. It is clear that SKYY Vodka uses sex and lavish lifestyles to sell their product, but I found another product that does the complete opposite. A great campaign that is relatively new is the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. As I have researched in my advertising class, I have seen how it
takes everyday women of all shapes, colors, and sizes and uses them as the spokes models, rather than one shape, color, and size. This is a step forward, which will hopefully continue to transform the way people are viewed, and used in the media. The representatives on the SKYY Vodka campaign can learn something from the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*. The advertisements for this campaign are not sexual and do not glamorize a certain lifestyle. They actually liberate and build self esteem towards women. As stated above, most of the models in the SKYY Vodka advertisements are scantily clad, and are extremely sexualized. They are used strictly as body parts. If SKYY Vodka were to change the content of their advertisements and make them liberating towards women *and* men, more people might buy their product! Women enjoy buying the Dove products because their advertisements are meant to build self esteem rather than crush it. When a company uses positivity to build up its customers, more people will buy the product if they feel that it supports a more varied group of people, and is for the common good of *everyone*, not just one particular lifestyle.

**What if children see these advertisements?**

As stated earlier, people are surrounded with over 3000 advertisements everyday (Larson, 2008). That is certainly more than most people expect. People are engulfed with advertisements everywhere they go! This means, that children are also surrounded with all of these advertisements. Whether a child or even a teenager are watching television or reading a magazine, they will be presented with “racy” advertisements. The SKYY Vodka advertisements are not meant to be viewed by children. This is not a moral issue based on any religious rules, but it *is* ethical! Children should not be looking at alcohol advertisements, and advertisements
that star half naked women, or men in suggestive positions. Underage drinking is a huge problem in our society, and part of that has to be from advertisements. SKYY Vodka specifically makes its’ drink seem so tasty and refined. Perhaps these children and teenagers think that if they drink alcohol [SKYY Vodka], that they will then be associated with a more high class lifestyle, or will fit in with the really rich people that they see in the pictures. There was a study done by the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, regarding children aged 12 years old to adults and how they viewed alcohol advertisements in magazines (2004). The point of the study was to determine which age group paid attention to which type of alcohol the most, from viewing advertisements for alcohol in magazines. These were the results: “alcohol companies spent $590.4 million to place 471 beer and ale advertisements (8%), 4748 distilled spir-its advertisements (76%), 116 low-alcohol refresher advertisements (2%), and 904 advertisements for wine (14%) in magazines in 2001 and 2002. In 2002, underage youth saw 45% more beer and ale advertising, 12% more distilled spirits advertising, 65% more low-alcohol refresher advertising, and 69% less advertising for wine than persons 21 years and older. Girls aged 12 to 20 years were more likely to be exposed to beer, ale, and low-alcohol refresher advertising than women in the group aged 21 to 34 or women in the group aged 21 years and older. Girls' exposure to low-alcohol refresher advertising increased by 216% from 2001 to 2002, while boys' exposure increased 46%” (Jernigan, Ostroff, Ross, O’Hara, 2004). The doctors concluded that, “exposure of underage girls to alcohol advertising is substantial and increasing, pointing to the failure of industry self-regulation and the need for further action” (Jernigan, Ostroff, Ross, O’Hara, 2004). This study proves that underage girls are more aware of different alcohol advertisements then adults over the legal drinking age! If girls are seeing these advertisements,
then they are definitely seeing the more obscene advertisements, such as the SKYY Vodka. Again, children should not see these advertisements let alone girls, because women are the ones being dehumanized in the advertisements. Girls should not see these advertisements, for they may aspire to be like the women in the advertisements who are obviously being ruled or even owned by the men. Also, children should not be surrounded with these advertisements because they may start to drink extra early if they see the luxurious lifestyles being personified in the advertisements ultimately causing them to want to be a part of that. If the SKYY Vodka advertisements were less obscene and presented women [and men at times], in the same light, then these advertisements would not be as harmful to children. But, still of course, they should not be presented with alcohol if they are too young. Advertising is a normal and great part of the American culture, but some advertising campaigns just go a little too far.

How SKYY Vodka Advertisements and law intertwine.

There are hundreds of laws regarding alcohol. They vary from type of alcohol, to how companies are allowed to sell alcohol, to labels, and lastly alcohol taxes. There are even advertising laws, which is very interesting considering the content of the SKYY Vodka advertisements are still obscene after they have been approved. According to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, all alcohol advertisements, and labeling must be sent to their new Alcohol Beverage Advertising Program. It states within the ABAP document: “under our new Alcohol Beverage Advertising Program, TTB plans to contact alcohol producers and importers and request that they provide the following information as to specified brands: current, selected advertising materials such as posters, flyers, point of sale materials, press releases, Web
sites, Web page materials, and magazine and periodical ads, as well as television and radio
advertisements. We will examine this advertising to determine compliance with mandatory and
prohibited statement requirements” (Libertucci, 2004). This is a great step towards more
positive advertising of alcoholic beverages. There is one catch. There are ten guidelines that the
reviewers of the advertisements look for to be met as they study the different advertisements.
One in particular, (number four), seems that it would have been the rule that would have changed
the content in the SKYY Vodka advertisements. The guideline states: “statements, designs, or
the use of subliminal representations that are obscene or indecent” (Libertucci, 2004). This
guideline completely sums up the essence of most SKYY Vodka advertisements. Not only are
the designs indecent and obscene, but there are subliminal representations of lavish lifestyles in
most of the advertisements. Somehow, SKYY Vodka advertisements passed the guidelines set
by the ABAP, even though the advertisements very clearly go against the guidelines. It is as if
the makers of these advertisements want people to think that if they drink SKYY Vodka, then
they will have a very lavish lifestyle, or that they will get to “hook up” with really hot, half
naked girls. Perhaps the people that scan the advertisements have so many, that they do it in a
quick manner just to get the job done; or maybe they are just very lax about letting
advertisements pass the guidelines. Regardless, the advertisements speak for themselves, and
should not have passed the guidelines that the ABAP have created.

Although the SKYY Vodka Company may be successful in selling their products, they
are still going about the advertising process in the wrong way. They are sexualizing their
advertisements, and using women and certain body parts to sell their product, rather than simply
using the product itself. SKYY Vodka advertisements are negative, not only because of this fact
but because of underlying situations that may result from the advertisements. For example, children should not see these advertisements. They are too sexual for children to bear witness to. Also, the advertisements are in a sense false! Just because someone drinks SKYY Vodka, does not mean they are going to essentially be rich and get to hook up with naked women. Lastly, the main reason that SKYY Vodka advertisements are negative is because of the way they portray women. The women in the advertisements are used only for viewing pleasure. Rather than women being portrayed for the sole purpose of being women, their body parts are fragmented and used as different elements in the advertisements. The fact that they are portrayed and used in such a negative light is belittling and demeaning. It is said that “bodies are not just people, but signifying vehicles, that express the social construction of desires and needs” (Williams, 2009). The SKYY Vodka Company certainly embraces this theory. Regardless to the content of their advertisements, until SKYY Vodka are halted by the ABAP, they are going to continue to create indecent and obscene advertisements.
References


*Kevin Williams-Professor at Shepherd University. Medis Studies Class

*Monica Larson-Professor at Shepherd University. Advertising and Imagery Class