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Question 1: When will advertising embrace diversity, gender and race equality, and start reflecting the real world? Critically discuss and respond.

*In this essay I will discuss female representation in advertising.

2,560 words

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Research conducted by The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media reveals that ‘One-in-ten female characters are shown in sexually revealing clothing – six times the number of male characters’ (2017). Throughout advertising history female representation has often been stereotypical, repeatedly portraying compliant white women in domesticated or sexualized roles. The 1972 study by the National Organization of Women analysed over 1,200 adverts in the US, which reported many examples of women rendered as ‘decorative objects’ and ‘unintelligent’ (Gill, 2007, p. 78). Although female representation in advertising has historically been unkind and unrealistic, it has also evolved through the efforts of emerging advocates challenging a male-dominated industry, influential brands like Nike, and the rise of woke washing awareness.

Fig 1, (Heusen, 1951, *Show her it's a man's world*)

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the female representation in advertising was mostly sexist and cliched with unrealistic narratives. Post-World War II adverts depicted women as submissive, domestic figures, while positioning men as the dominant figure. A prime example is the Van Heusen Ties advert from the 1950s, which used the tagline 'Show her it's a man's world'. This reflects the post-war mind set to return women to home duties after their important roles in the workforce during the war (Yesil, 2004, p.113).

The themes in advertising from this period targeted male consumers entirely, as explained by Berman, 'the new market for commodities includes a multitude of men with passions for consumption' (1981, p. 92) and 'they would have a good deal more money than taste' (1981, p. 94). If you view the Van Heusen advertisement campaign through the eye of the creator, I believe they had no second thoughts regarding the tasteless sexist messaging, this advert was a straight-shooting hit for the intended audience of that period.

Thankfully this narrow-minded portrayal of women was challenged by the Second-Wave Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, feminists called for 'Working housewives' (Molony and Nelson, 2017, p. 162) and for women to have more job and education opportunities. 'According to Hawkins, in 1966, two-thirds of the master's degrees and 88 percent of the doctorates were awarded to men' (1969, cited Burke, 2017). It is possible to see how women would have felt misrepresented during this period, and with a male-dominated workforce, it's clear why these issues went largely unchallenged in advertising.

Fig 2, (Kruger, 1989, *Your body is a battleground*)

Likewise, another advocate who pushed back was Barbara Kruger. Kruger's piece created for the Women's March on Washington in 1989 to protest a new wave of anti-abortion laws (Van Gagen, 2020) used stark text and imagery, aimed to challenge how women's bodies were marketed. The phrase 'Your Body is a Battleground' emphasised the political struggle over female autonomy and rights (Calak 2008). Kamimura remarks that 'Krugers art is, most of all, art of representation,' and that 'she constructs her own language, that speaks for "us", the oppressed, exploited and objectified subjects' (1987, p. 42). These insights suggest the impact words and imagery collectively can have on an audience and shows that when enough people speak out about an issue, regardless of its scale, their voices can still create significant change.

Fig 3, (Harrison, Kelly and Fido, 2001, *Tate Installation*)

Similarly, Mary Kelly and her involvement in the Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-1975 exhibition, showcased the inconsistencies and unfair pay gap between the sexes throughout the labour industries. Interestingly she explained in an interview,

> The aesthetic strategy for Women and Work, we didn't want to picture the women, so when you see the work it's their hands. Most of the machine's men work with that are documented on the films that I took need the whole body. But the grades, which is where you could put women, say their work was different so that it wasn't subject to equal pay (REcreativeUK, 2019).

This design choice was deliberate; Kelly and others didn't want to photograph the women for fear of potential repercussions from their employers. By focusing on their hands, Kelly powerfully shows that these women were people, deserving of equal pay regardless of sex. This subtle yet impactful decision reflects how women were disregarded in the workforce at the time and emphasises the struggle for gender equality.

Despite these advocates for change, advertising remained slow to reflect the feminist ideals, continuing to promote limited examples of women in mainstream media, for example the 2015 Protein World Campaign.

Fig 4, (Protein World, 2015, *Are you beach body ready?)*

Whether or not Protein World intended to spark controversy and backlash, the adverts impact was inevitable. The tagline 'implies that any woman at the beach has an obligation to fulfil the role society has given her, that is to uphold a certain standard of beauty' (Chochinov, 2016, p. 53). This campaign represented 'socially acceptable versions of femininity' (Chochinov, 2016, p. 52), which can invoke thoughts of body shame. For many women the connotations of the words 'beach body' can exude feelings of dread and self-criticism with added pressure to conform to beauty ideals. As remarked by Kannan and Tyagi, 'Language has a powerful influence over people and their behaviour' (2013). Protein World could be seen as using this narrative to push consumers into purchasing the product in search of the idealized body image.

Looking at these past advertising examples, there was a significant gap between how men perceived women and how women wanted to be represented. Berman argues that

‘Advertisements are often out of date: They show us the kind of social arrangements that were characteristic when we were growing up – or even when our parents were growing up’ (1981, p. 91). The outdated portrayals that Kelly and Kruger challenged highlight their drive to hold companies and governments accountable for their misjudgements. These advocates spoke out for those who had no voice, which I believe was a courageous act. Unlike today, when social media gives many people a platform to express their views, back then, fewer individuals had the opportunity to publicly challenge such misrepresentation and hold companies accountable for their mistakes.

The influence of advertising on consumers has significantly increased in recent years, the magnitude of adverts people see daily, whether it’s on social media, television or simply on the street can be overwhelming. The impact of advertising can be both positive and negative, inevitably determining what the consumer thinks about the brand. As Berman explains,

> It’s simply not possible to prefilter all the arriving visual information. Even if you choose to focus on one of many simultaneous incoming streams, by the time you shut your eyes the image is already burned into your memory. And so much of the barrage sticks in your subconscious, unedited, with great power to influence your emotions and decisions (2009, p. 123).

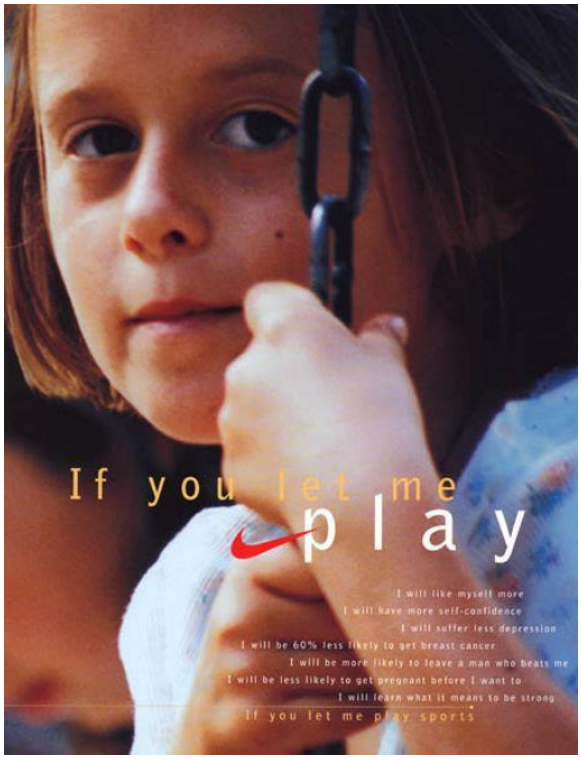

Fig 5, (Nike, 1995, *If you let me play)*

With Bermans account in mind, one brand that paved the way especially for its time is Nike. Their 1995 campaign, 'If you let me play' showcased how girls 'enhance their lives, their confidence and resilience' when they engage in sports (Eyada, 2020, p. 34). The campaign was not only about empowering girls but also represented women of colour. 'Nike is an excellent storyteller, through the use of a variety of brand stories, effectively deepens people's impression of the Nike brand' (Elbagory et al., 2024, p. 432). Nike's ability to tap into the real-life struggles and emotions of consumers creates a sense of understanding and empowerment, which ultimately strengthens brand loyalty and support. Schiff confirms this, 'consumers with a strong emotional connection to a brand are 47% more likely to contribute revenue' (Schiff, 2013). In turn, it is plausible

that consumers are also more likely to share content that resonates with them, further extending the reach and impact of their campaigns.

Fig 6, (Nike, 2019, *Dream Crazy*)

Nike have long used celebrity endorsements to build its brand, with the 2019 'Dream Crazy' campaign featuring Serena Williams as a strong example. Williams, a black woman who is sporting superstar, embodies Nike's message of empowerment and challenges both racial and gender stereotypes. As Kilroy notes, 'Nike's brand is based around celebrity endorsements. They turn athletes into heroes for society to idolize' (2020, p. 15). This marketing strategy creates that sense of confidence for the consumer, when a famous athlete like Serena endorses Nike, it creates an aspirational connection. Consumers may feel that buying Nike products will help them identify with her success and lifestyle, as Khatri explains 'the celebrity endorsers image is transferred to the product so that those who use the product are associated with the image' (2006, p. 28).

Both of Nike's campaigns demonstrate how advertising can reshape female representation. The portrayed narrative of inclusivity and diversity throughout Nike's

brand story sets them apart from the competition. However, with the growing awareness of woke-washing and the growing influence of social media in brand advertising, it's often unclear whether brands are genuinely advocating for change. Despite Nike promoting inclusive advertisements, they, like many other brands, have faced repeated accusations of woke-washing. As Klein explains, 'Nike's sweatshop scandals have been subject to over 1,500 news articles and opinion columns' (2000, p. 366). Brands appear to promote one message publicly yet fail to reflect those values in their business practices behind closed doors. To which prompts the question whether it is all just a strategy to drive profit.

Fig 7, (H&M, 2016, *She's a lady*)

> Woke washing occurs when brands detach their messaging from their core values, purpose, and practices, capitalizing on social justice movements to enhance their brand image (Kaasa and Omsland, 2023, p. 2).

H&M among others has been accused of this problem. While the brand's 2016 She's a Lady campaign promoted inclusivity and female empowerment, featuring diverse female models to project an image of progressive female representation, the company

has faced repeated criticism for a lack of transparency and consistency in its operations. As Miettinen notes, ‘Independent evaluations criticized H&M for practices such as green-washing and concerns about labour conditions’ (2024, p. 29), particularly affecting women in low-wage countries. A report by the Global Labour Justice explains ‘women workers employed in an H&M supplier factory in Bangalore, India reported physical abuse associated with pressure to meet production targets’, a female worker describes ‘being thrown to the floor and beaten, including on her breasts’ (2018, p. 4). H&M sources from 32 factories across Asia (Global Labour Justice, 2018, p. 4), the brand has a significant responsibility to ensure the safety and fair treatment of workers. The fact that such abuse has been reported raises serious concerns about how widespread these occurrences may be. These issues reveal a big disconnect between the brand's imagery and its exploitative practices, exposing the insincerity behind its messaging and values. Despite H&M's downfalls, the brand remains a headliner in the fashion industry. The question that arises is how much do consumers really care about these issues when they are not directly confronted with them.

Fig 8, (Dove, 2004, *Real Beauty)*

Successful messaging in advertising can be incredibly advantageous for brands. With advertising being scrutinized by millions of consumers worldwide, brands hold significant responsibility in shaping people's perceptions. Therefore, when Dove launched its Real Beauty campaign in 2004, Johnston and Taylor noted that the campaign 'generated commercial success, celebrity endorsements, praise from professional associations and gender scholars, and general media acclaim' (2008, quoted in McCleary, 2014, p. 3). The campaign aimed to celebrate diverse skin types, body shapes, and women of all appearances, positioning itself as a brand committed to representing real-life women.

Fig 9, (Dove, 2017, *Real Beauty*)

However, despite the campaign's success, Dove faced significant backlash in 2017 after releasing a Facebook advert in the USA that was widely criticized as 'insensitive' and 'racist'. The advert depicted 'a Black woman turning white after using Dove lotion' (Conor, 2017). This incident highlights how consumers can hold brands accountable through social media. In contrast to H&M', where behind the scenes criticisms around labour conditions often go unnoticed, Dove's misstep sparked immediate and widespread outrage. When the issue is visible, consumers play an active role in holding brands responbile, forcing them to respond quickly and correct their mistakes.

Although consumers disapproved of the advert, model Lola Ogunyemi expressed that her experience with the Dove team was 'positive'. She described having 'an amazing time on set' and noted that the campaign's objective was 'to use our differences to highlight the fact that all skin deserves gentleness' Ogunyemi valued the opportunity to

‘represent my dark-skinned sisters’ (2020). While Dove's original intention with the advert was commendable, the brand’s misjudgement in execution had consequences. A single misstep in advertising can create doubt in consumers’ minds, leaving a mark on the brand’s reputation that may not be easily removed.

Fig 10, (Pepsi, 2017, *Live for now*)

With reputation in mind, Pepsi's infamous Live for Now advert, featuring Kendall Jenner, is a prime example of woke-washing. Released in 2017, the commercial portrayed Jenner joining a protest, whereby she appears to ‘solve’ the situation by giving an officer a Pepsi as the crowd cheers and everyone involved becomes happy’ (Taylor, 2017).

> Many accused the advert for appropriating the worldwide ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement which campaigns against violence and systematic racism towards black people in the aid of selling a global soft drink brand (Fordyce, 2018).

Pepsi’s attempt to capitalize on the reality of protest for commercial gain was widely criticized. As Macgregor remarks, ‘Know that we stand with you, so long as you don't ask

what exactly we're standing for' (2022), Pepsi are averting responsibility in this advert, it is unclear what the message is.

Not only was this a prime example of woke-washing, but the brands choice of supermodel Jenner - a wealthy, white, privileged woman - as the face of the campaign felt 'tone-deaf' and insensitive. (Kim, 2020) The advert illustrated another form of misrepresentation of women in advertising, as it showcased social justice movements without acknowledging the true voices and real struggles at the heart of those movements. The broader issue with many of the big-name brand campaigns is that while they attempt to highlight social issues, they often fail to understand the cause. Whether that's due to a lack of 'marketing research' or misunderstanding of the movement, these adverts fall short of their intended message (Solomon, 2013, p. 111). It is questionable how such campaigns get signed off in the first place.

On reflection it seems to me that, in many ways, advertising has come full circle. In the past, adverts reflected how brands perceived women, which was presented as their 'truth'. However, this portrayal didn't accurately reflect how women truly felt. Thanks to the work of advocates like Kruger and Kelly, brands had to reconsider their approach. Over time, this led to a shift where brands began to advertise what they believed their audience wanted to see. But even then, many of these claims were not backed by genuine actions behind the scenes. In the end, we've returned to a situation where many brands are once again presenting their version of the 'truth', but it's still not the whole truth, it's simply more misrepresentation.

In conclusion, the question of when advertising will reflect the real world depends not only on the efforts of progressive brands and advocates but also on consumers who play a vital role in holding companies accountable. True change requires more than just inclusive messaging but by notable changes in corporate practices across the industries. As Berman argues, 'A creative, ethical solution almost always exists that provides a desirable outcome for both the direct and indirect parties involved' (2009, p. 125). I believe this is achievable and essential, and the next decade could mark a crucial turning point for the industry, with the potential to genuinely reflect the diverse and complex reality of the world we live in.

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