

Sex, Violence and Advertising: Saint Mary's prof critical of de-humanizing images

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She is naked, slung over the man's shoulder. He is naked, too, but muscular and dominant, carrying her toward the woods.

Chris McCormick knows that the ubiquitous ad for Obsession cologne grabs our attention.

"People see so many ads, they become so desensitized, and it makes them stop and look," says McCormick, an assistant sociology professor at Saint Mary's University.

A sly, elusive blend of sex and violence is becoming a popular marketing tool, he says. Not only for cologne, but for clothes, alcohol and other goods.

McCormick says the very subtlety of these ads is deceptive and what makes them dangerous.

There's a lot of really implicit subtle, violence and it occurs over and over again in these ads. Once you start looking for it, once you educate yourself to see it, you realize it's there all the time," he says.

100 magazines

"It's tied to sex, so what it does is 'sexualize' violence. It almost makes violence desirable, or at least makes violence acceptable as part of that package of desire and pleasure."

McCormick studied ads from 100 magazines he bought in December 1990. He bought *Business Week*, *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle* and 96 more of North America's most popular magazines.

Some are obvious. McCormick says he has collected many ads showing women smiling as they are being hit.

"There's one that comes to mind," he recalls. "It's a picture of a woman, very close up, all you saw was her neck and her head, and her face is slightly turned toward us. There was this liquid and a bunch of peaches hitting her in the side of the head. It was an advertisement for Peach Schnapps, and the caption read 'The Flavor's Gonna Hit You.' And she was smiling, she was enjoying it."

Ambiguity of ads

An ad for Drambuie shows an attractive woman through a Venetian blind, with a shadowy man in the hallway behind her. The caption is "Taste the Intrigue."

The ad's ambiguity—Is it fun or fear? Is she being shadowed by her lover or an unknown attacker?—scares McCormick.

"Maybe it's an affair, maybe it's intriguing. But I think linking a suggestion of violence to the suggestion of sexuality, makes it very dangerous," he says.

Ads for Guess? Jeans include a lot of "symbolic sexual assault," McCormick says. Women are pictured as being held against their will, he says and looking "bereft" in what McCormick says is supposed to be the aftermath of rape.

Many of the violent sex ads occur in fashion and cosmetics ads aimed at women, he says.

"There's a new product, Kikit Jeans, I believe, which has very violent ads," McCormick says. "Men with guns, men holding women back by their hair, women being tied back to posts. Very extreme violence, very explicit violence."

Consumers should educate themselves to what they are seeing, he says. Many people McCormick knows don't notice the ads until he points out their implications.

"We never see men in these positions," he says. "We never see men upside down, we never see men being tied up, we never see men being assaulted by women, we never see men being hit by men, being hit by things in the head. We certainly wouldn't see men enjoying it. "Sometimes it's less obvious. McCormick also targets less offensive ads that show male domination. Many cleanser ads in homemakers' magazines tend to show only women doing housework and perpetuate gender stereotypes, he says. Many ads simply show the man dominating sexually, acting for their own pleasure and not the woman's, says McCormick.

There are some new age ads by companies like Benetton and Johnny Walker, which use racial and gender equality to sell their wares.

"A lot of them trade upon very traditional themes like romance, of course," McCormick says. "I mean, that's what Johnny Walker is about, heterosexual romance."

Even the new age ones are troublesome, though, with 90's dads still in dominant roles, he says.

"Usually the men are very masculine. They have big muscles or they're very successful. Being shown as sensitive doesn't compromise the masculinity, and that's interesting that the only way you can show a sensitive man is if he's already successful in other ways of being a man."

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