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***AD NATURAL: A CAMPAIGN ADVOCATING FOR REPRESENTATION OF
DIVERSE FEMALE BODY TYPES IN ADVERTISING PRACTICES***

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Thesis Advisor: Briar Levit
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss the conceptualization, research, and execution of my awareness campaign, Ad Natural, in which I explore the best methods for promoting representation of diverse body types among women in advertisements. Through studying the history of women in advertising, the conduction of an anonymous survey, and competitor analysis I am able to determine where there is room for growth in advocating for this cause and integrate the solutions into the campaign. The end result consists of a full brand identity across a website, advertisement series, and merchandise with consistent messaging and imagery meant to empower the desired target audience.

Keywords: advertising, diversity, representation, body positivity, campaign

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is everywhere. We see it on billboards, magazines, TV, social media... the list goes on. Because we have so much exposure to advertisements, they influence us and how we view the world, even if we only view them subconsciously.

Due to this fact, it is important to acknowledge how brands portray different groups of people in their advertising, specifically women. There has been a long history of women being ridiculed and treated as mere objects in advertising to promote a product. Their bodies are sexualized, taken apart and manipulate to appeal to the male gaze, setting a “standard” of what a perfect body looks like.

Personally, I was exposed to a lot of these types of ads growing up. I grew up in the 2000s-2010s where Photoshop was on the rise and an obsession for thinness was more prevalent than ever. I would continue to see the same body type being promoted as “sexy” and “desirable”: flat stomach, no stretch marks, “perfectly-sized” breasts and butt, and no blemishes to be found.

As you could imagine, this gave me a very negative view on my own body for a very long time. I constantly tugged at any sort of fat on my stomach, wore shirts that didn't show off the size of my chest for fear of being judged, and was embarrassed of photos that showed any sign of cellulite or stretch marks. This really tanked my mental health and I've only recently started to become confident in my body.

Unfortunately, my experience is not unique. Many women have a similar story to mine, feeling as though they were exposed to unrealistic beauty standards at a young age. As a result, they have had to experience body issues even into their adulthood.

This issue is especially prevalent today in the age of social media. In the past couple of years they have brought in significantly more advertisements to flood people's feeds as they scroll. Viewers have a much higher chance than ever before of interacting with something that could influence their perception.

Although a lot of brands have improved their messaging towards women, there is still a common trend of a specific body type being promoted in advertisements. Girls and young women continue to be exposed to an ideal look that they can't necessarily achieve.

The advertising industry as a whole needs to change its views towards women and stray away from this “perfect body” ideology. At the same time women should feel comfortable in their skin regardless of any harmful messaging that might be sent their way. So how can we empower women to embrace their beauty and advocate for a change?

RESEARCH

I. History of Women in Advertising

When analyzing the history of how women have been portrayed in advertising practices, I noticed a common theme that spans over several decades. Generally, advertisements that have women at the center use language that belittles and humiliates them. Additionally, these women are commonly portrayed as sexual objects with “perfect bodies”. This issue is nothing new, but the intensity of it all has only gotten worse with technological advancements.

To begin my research on this topic I watched the documentary *Miss Representation*, a film from 2011 that discusses how women have historically been portrayed in the media. Although this documentary focused on a broad range of media, they did provide key insights into the role of advertising throughout the years and how their representation of women influenced viewers.

From this film, I was able to establish a timeline for how advertisements were being used throughout several decades. For example, after World War II many women were established and empowered in the workforce, threatening the patriarchal status quo. To combat this, advertisers tried to convince them that home was where they belonged, essentially “re-domesticating” them (Newsom, 2011). They go on to mention that the 90s brought an incline of sexualized imagery in advertisements which only worsened with the growth of Photoshop.

Jean Kilbourne, a public speaker and activist for women in advertising, goes into further detail on this issue in a Ted Talk arguing that the image of women in advertising is worse than ever. Because of photoshop and the

objectification of women, models’ bodies are often manipulated to be unnaturally thin, unrealistically “youthful”, and white-washed in instances of models of color. Worst of all, because of these sexualized portrayals of women, younger consumers become, “more prone to eating disorders, depression and low self-esteem” (Kilbourne, 2011).

In recent years, brands have started to make the move towards diversifying their advertising campaigns. For example, in 2016 Dove launched an ad campaign titled “MyBeautyMySay, where they told the stories of several different women who were criticized about their bodies and how they were perceived by the rest of the world. They included women from different ethnicities, ages, and body types, as well as women who presented themselves more masculine or feminine. The message of the advertisement was essentially to embrace who you are and not care about what other people say, which to many, is much more empowering than advertising from the past.

Other brands on the other hand, aren’t doing as good of a job diversifying their representation. Victoria’s Secret for example has claimed that they are now trying to become the most body positive brand on the market. However, this company has a long history of promoting eating disorders towards their audience and expressing blatant transphobia and fatphobia (Valero de Urquia, 2021). It was only until recently, when Victoria Secret’s sales started to fall, that they started to have more diversified models. That being said, there was still no shift in the actual product, meaning real women can represent the brand but real women can’t shop at this company.

Having companies who genuinely want to provide representation for their audience through their advertising is extremely important: “... seeing diverse models [leads] to self-acceptance, higher self-esteem and body appreciation” (Jones, 2017). It also allows women to feel seen and of equal value to other people in our society.

II. Perspectives on Representation in Ads

I set out to gather more perspectives on this issue by releasing an anonymous survey that could be answered by a diverse group of people. I was able to gather insight from 36 respondents varying by gender, age, ethnicity, and body type. Several of these individuals also indicated having some combination of stretch marks, scars, tattoos, and other blemishes on their bodies.

The first set of questions had to do with people’s rate of exposure to advertisements. When asked how many times per day they consciously interacted with ads, 61.1% of people indicated 1-10 times per day, 22.2% indicated 10-20 times per day, 11.1% indicated 20-30 times per day, and 5.6% indicated 30+ times per day. 88.9% of these people also indicated that they got most of their exposure through social media over any other source.

I then asked participants about representation of their bodies in advertising. 63.9% of people indicated that they felt like their body type was not well-represented whereas 36.1% said they felt well-represented. Of that ratio though, there were still 88.9% of respondents that indicated they knew someone in their life that had a body type that wasn’t well-represented. It’s also worth mentioning that most of those who responded indicated experiencing some

sort of body dysmorphia or need to change their body because of an advertisement that they were exposed to.

Another portion of the survey asked about the respondent’s experiences with female representation in advertisements. Specifically, I asked them which brands portrayed a good representation of women and which ones had bad representation.

For brands that provide good representation of women, the top three responses were: American Eagle / Aerie, YITTY, and Savage X Fenty. As for brands that have bad representation of women, the top three responses were: Calvin Klein, any fragrance brand, and Victoria’s Secret.

The last question asked if the surveyors felt that women in general were well-represented in advertising. Thirty-three people total answered this question with 75.8% of them responding no and the other 24.2% answering yes.

There was a slight trend in all of the answers with a correlation between age and the types of answers that were given. As the age of the participant got lower, their answers would tend to gravitate towards a negative outlook on representation among ads and vice versa.

The results of this survey further support the idea that most advertisements do not show enough diversity in their messaging for their consumers to feel well-represented. They also show that women specifically are not portrayed in a positive light. Although the results show a lower percentage of exposure to advertisements than anticipated, it’s important to note the kind of influence these small rates of exposure have on the individual based on the other survey answers.

As mentioned earlier, this survey group was small in size and has room to grow. Further research on this subject would be necessary in order to get a more accurate range of perspectives on this issue.

III. Competitor Analysis

As the final portion of my research I wanted to take a look at what people were already doing to promote body positivity. I also looked at different campaigns targeting young women and those who were combating the use of photoshop in altering models' bodies.

Throughout my analysis a couple of campaigns stood out to me. Namely, the Be Real Campaign, founded in the UK in 2019.

This campaign targets all genders and provides several different resources surrounding body positivity and self-image. For example, they offer toolkits for schools to share their message, provide links to body positive influencers and social media pages, and share other people's stories about their struggles with their bodies. Unfortunately, this campaign seems less active in 2023, but there is a lot to be drawn from such a successful effort.

As far as campaigns targeting young women, Girl Up was an organization that took the forefront. Founded in 2010, this campaign empowers girls to get involved in social justice issues and become leaders. They hold events, provide leadership development and advertise stories of young girls speaking up. This campaign is still going strong today and continues to grow.

Advocacy is also shown in the prevention of significant body alteration through Photoshop in such campaigns as the Real/Unreal Project founded in Israel in 2015. This campaign promotes companies that don't hire models with weight lower than their healthy BMI and refuse to use Photoshop touch ups. They also periodically hold workshops for young girls, "aged 12-14 to strengthen their body image and self-confidence while getting acquainted with basic principles for a healthy lifestyle" (Barkan, 2023).

From these campaigns I was able to develop a list of strengths and weaknesses that I wanted to consider in my own efforts for getting my message across. For instance, I found a lot of appreciation for the resources that each campaign provided. Specifically, the stories sections from the Be Real campaign really stood out. It shows anyone that interacts with their website are not alone in their feelings. I also drew a lot of appreciation from the imagery that was used with each campaign. They honored the idea of diversity and representation that their messaging was going for.

The campaign that most resembled the messaging I was hoping to convey in my own project was the Real/Unreal Project. However, they lacked the appeal of their website to their target audience. It isn't as welcoming to younger women as other campaigns such as Girl Up, which is their biggest fault.

One other limitation that was noticed among these campaigns is that there aren't really any advertisements promoting the campaigns. Other than media endorsements, it is hard for potential audiences to learn about them.

EXECUTION

Based on my findings, I determined that the best solution for this problem would be to develop a new campaign promoting body positivity to girls and young women ages 12-22 who are constantly exposed to social media. This campaign would be centered around a website and advertisement series, supplemented by merchandise that could help with further promotion of the cause.

The first step of developing this campaign was to define a brand identity and system that could be used across mediums to increase recognition by new and returning viewers. It was imperative that the branding not only caught people's attention, but also created a sense of welcoming and appeal for a younger audience. With that in mind, Ad Natural was born.

Ad Natural (a play on words of "Act Natural") has a brand identity consisting of soft, minimalistic graphic elements, playful typography, and a color palette of purples and oranges. These design choices allow the campaign to appeal to the desired target audience while also straying away from the traditional pink color that is usually associated with femininity.



IV. Summary of Findings

It is clear that underrepresentation of certain body types has been prevalent in advertising for many years. Further, there has been a huge prevalence of misrepresenting women in advertisements. Both issues can have a huge effect on someone's mental health, confidence, and self-image that can last a lifetime.

Luckily some advertising campaigns have started working towards more diversity in their representation without Photoshop manipulation. To supplement those, there have also been a few very successful awareness campaigns launched, advocating for the cause. However, they don't really cater to the most vulnerable audience surrounding this issue: girls ages 12-22.

As the survey had shown, age had a correlation with the kinds of answers that were given regarding representation in advertising. The younger respondents felt the most underrepresented, which leads me to believe that the solution for this issue needed to target a younger audience than campaigns have in the past. They are the group that especially needs to realize their worth and learn that it is not their fault that they don't fit into the "perfect" body that they often see on their feed.

Another very important component of this brand was that photography of real women needed to be utilized throughout the campaign. If Ad Natural was meant to advocate for more diverse representation in advertisements, it needed to show what that could look like through the imagery that was being used.

To do that I gathered a group of nine women of varying ethnicities, body types, and gender expressions that could represent the brand. They were asked to wear clothing that was colorful and that they felt comfortable in, regardless of what that looked like for them. Each model was also posed in specific ways that catered to their body type and felt the most natural. The intention of this was to showcase the models as real, unique people and highlight that confidence doesn't correlate with how someone's body looks.*



* All participants of the photoshoot were asked to fill out model consent forms beforehand with promise of anonymity and no body modifications made in Photoshop. They were also made aware of the extent of how these photos were being used, specifically in the publication of this thesis to pdxscholar.

I. The Website

Once the brand had been defined, it was time to apply it to a website that served as the centerpiece for the entire campaign. Essentially, this website would serve as a resource for girls and young women to have access to in order to learn more about body positivity and how they could advocate for a change in advertising practices.

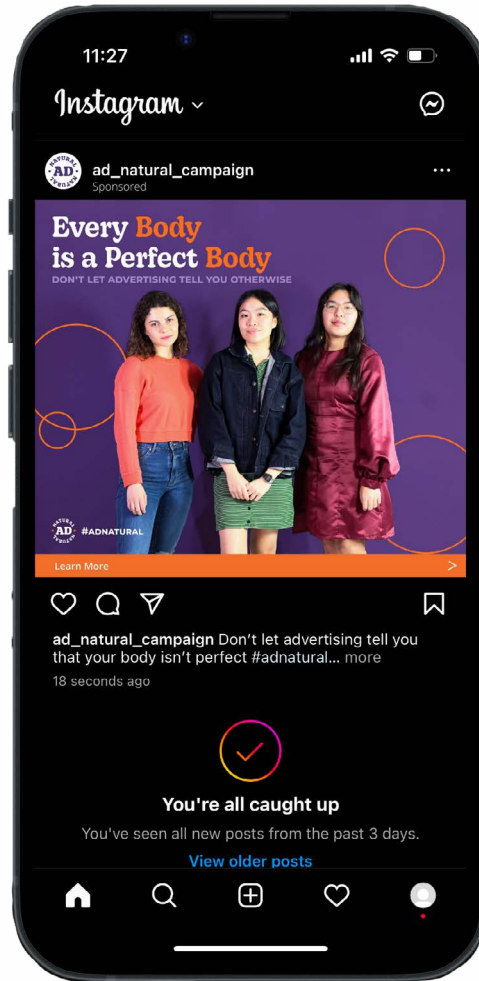
Components of this website include: a homepage with an introduction to the brand (shown on pg.8), an “About Us” page that provides an in-depth description of the goals of the campaign, an “Educational Blog” with articles discussing the importance of body positivity and diversity, a “Merchandise” page, and a “Resources” page.

These website features allow a user to walk through the story behind Ad Natural and feel welcomed by its contents. It also encourages them to come back and check in for new blog posts that could address new issues surrounding body positivity that they are curious about. This website is meant to be a safe space for its users to gather information, feel seen, and have access to any resources they might need in relation to the effects of body negativity found in other ads.

II. Advertisements

Ideally, viewers of the website would have been directed there by the advertisements that would be launched on social media. Such advertisements consist of similar imagery to





those seen on the website with messaging that is meant to empower the target audience and criticize the current practice in advertising.

To ensure that the target audience would be reached, these advertisements would appear on Instagram stories and feeds as sponsored ads. When it comes to these kinds of posts, adjustments can be made to the advertisements' reach, ensuring that they are shown to a particular demographic. In this case, these ads would target girls ages 12-22.

It's also important to note that although the main purpose of these ads are to direct people to the website, they should be able to stand alone and be just as effective to viewers. These ads should disrupt the flow of harmful messaging from other brands. Most importantly, they should

show users that real women can be represented in advertisements and make them aware of the problem that continues to be present.

III. Merchandise

To supplement the other components of the campaign, merchandise would be sold on the website to further promote the cause (shown on pg.11). Girls and young women have the ability to feel empowered by embracing the messaging of the merchandise and showing it off to the people around them.

Like the rest of the campaign, these pieces of merchandise are colorful and playful, using the same messaging as those in the ads. They take the form of t-shirts, buttons, and posters with a few color variations available for each.



CONCLUSION

Although the advertising industry has greatly improved its representation of women in their messaging over the past few years, there is still a lot of room for improvement. Girls and young women need to be shown that their bodies don't have to look a certain way to be considered "desirable" or "perfect". Everyone is unique and beauty takes many forms.

Ad Natural is meant to advocate for this kind of a change in the advertising industry. Simultaneously it is meant to be educating girls and young women on what it means to be body positive, why it is important, and how they can build awareness for the cause. If successful, this campaign can prevent detrimental effects to their mental health and self-image that has historically affected many others, including myself.

With more awareness campaigns like this out in the world, the advertising industry can begin shifting in a different direction. More focus can be put into the promotion of an idea or product rather than making sure that the models look "perfect". Brands can create messaging with real people, for real people, because contrary to what advertising has said in the past, representation is empowering.

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