



LESSON

Critical Viewer Activity

In this lesson, students will be introduced to some of the hidden tactics often used by advertisers in marketing their products. Students will be asked to consider the impact of these tactics on self-esteem and body image, and to come up with some alternative advertising styles that could send healthier messages. The activities were adapted with permission from the GO GIRLS! Curriculum produced by the National Eating Disorders Association.

Grade Level 3-5, 6-8

Topic: Gender & Sexual Identity, Bullying & Bias

Subject: Social Studies, Science & Health

Social Justice Domain: Justice

OBJECTIVES

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- explain different techniques used by advertisers
- analyze fashion and beauty advertisements

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why is it important to be a critical viewer of advertisements?

Enduring Understandings

Some advertisements are deceptive because they contain manipulated images and messages designed to make the viewer want to imitate what is shown and purchase the featured products.

MATERIALS

Fashion magazine layouts and ads, catalogues, and website ads for women's and girls' clothing and beauty products

Vocabulary

advertising [ad-ver-ti-zing] (*noun*) the process of creating something (such as a TV or radio commercial or printed ad) that is shown or presented to the public to help sell a product or to make an announcement

Suggested Procedure

1. Share with students some of the techniques advertisers use to create the "perfect" woman. Most of the images that we see in fashion advertisements involve a tremendous amount of thought, planning and editing. Every element is intentional—every color, every shadow, every hand position. Even the smallest item in a scene, seemingly insignificant, was chosen for a reason—to convey a very specific mood, feeling or relationship. Here are some of the tools of the advertiser's trade:

Physical tactics: Clothing used in fashion layouts often comes in one small size provided by the designer. In order for different models to fit the same dress, advertisers use a variety of "body enhancers" and "body reducers." For example:

- Bras are stuffed with pads to fill out the front of a dress that is too loose. Padded underwear is also used to fill out the back of a dress.
- Duct-tape is often used to tape breasts together to create cleavage.
- Girdles are used to squeeze the flesh of models into a dress sample size that is too small.
- Excess flesh is duct-taped in the back for a front-angle photograph depicting a taut, streamlined, wrinkle-free body. Models can be taped from the front for a rear or side angle photograph showing tight, firm hips, buttocks, legs and arms.
- Heavy clamps are used to cinch clothing in and weigh it down to create an illusion of the perfect fit.

These physical tactics also help to explain why clothes rarely look the same when people try them on in the store as they do in advertisements, in fashion layouts and on mannequins.

Image manipulation: Once a photo shoot is complete, photographs can be altered even further through a process called re-imaging. The image can be changed in thousands of ways. These changes can vary from a simple adjustment to a radical restructuring of the entire scene. Almost every magazine or website image uses computer re-imaging in some way.

- Colors can be transformed. Eye color, hair color, clothing colors can all be easily replaced with the click of a button.
- A smoothing technique can be used to minimize the appearance of wrinkles, lines, blemishes and shadows.
- An erasing tool is often used to literally eliminate inches from a model's thighs, hips, waist and arms.
- Some advertisements combine different body parts from different models to create the “perfect woman.” Advertisers can “create” a woman who does not exist in real life by using the legs of one model, the head of another and the arms of a third.
- All of these alterations are nearly undetectable, leading the consumer to believe that these models look this way naturally.

Ask: “If we are taught that it is normal and desirable to look like the models in ads and fashion layouts, does that imply that it is abnormal, undesirable and even ugly if people do have wrinkles, veins, pores, cellulite, birthmarks, bodily hair and other natural body characteristics?”

Share with students the poll results that found 75 percent of women are dissatisfied with their appearance. Ask: “Do you think advertising plays a role in this statistic? Why?”

As you conduct the lesson, it is important to emphasize that “thin” is not bad and that many people are genetically predisposed to a thin body type. But when magazine features, television shows, web sites, and all types of advertising portray only thin women, this can lead society to believe that thin—and only thin—is normal and desirable.

2. Ask your students to bring magazines and advertisements to class.

After they have had time to look through these visual aids, ask and discuss the following questions:

- What types of bodies are most prevalent?
- Do any of the fashion layouts (as opposed to advertisements) show diverse body sizes? (While some product advertisers are beginning to use a few diverse sized models, very few fashion magazines do so—unless the magazine is targeted at an older, plus-sized, or other specific audience.)
- Do the models in the advertisements tell a true story of the natural diversity that exists in the real world with regard to body size and shape, ethnicity or

- age? Why or why not?
- How do advertisements try to define for us what is "normal" and "desirable"?
 - How might advertisements make people feel inadequate, imperfect and dissatisfied with their bodies?
 - What words and images do ads use to try to convince us that if we buy their product we will look like these models?
 - How do some advertisements convey to us that a woman's success has more to do with her appearance than her intelligence, competence, or strength? How might this messaging be damaging to women's self esteem?
 - Why might such ads encourage some young women, dissatisfied with their appearance, to turn to dieting or even to eating disorders in an attempt to become "normal," "acceptable" or "beautiful"?

3. Being a Critical Viewer: Tell students that there's nothing wrong with enjoying fashion or celebrity magazines and websites. Many contain important, informative and entertaining articles. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to be stylish or using and buying beauty products. What is important is making sure that we are purchasing these products and supporting these advertisers by choice rather than by being manipulated by hidden advertising tactics.

Ask: "What are some practical reasons you might buy a product?" As an example, say that we might choose to buy a particular type of shampoo for a number of different reasons—the brand is good for curly hair, the brand is good for brown hair, the commercial was funny, the bottle is cute, the brand is inexpensive—all of these reasons depend on personal preference.

Note that what is not acceptable is to be manipulated into purchasing a particular brand because the advertisers of that brand tried to make us feel ugly, inferior, boring, stupid and unpopular—promising to help us become beautiful, perfect, exciting, brilliant and desirable simply by purchasing a bottle of shampoo.

Ask: "So, how do we know the difference?" After students share their answers, read and discuss tips about becoming a critical viewer of the media. Students can read the second half at home, or use the information later when they are developing peer awareness materials.

To Be a Critical Viewer, Remember:

- All media images and messages are constructions. They are NOT reflections of reality. Advertisements and other media messages have been carefully crafted with an intent to send a very specific message.

- Advertisements are created to do one thing: convince you to buy or support a specific product or service.
- To convince you to buy a specific product or service, advertisers will often construct an emotional experience that looks like reality. Remember, you are only seeing what the advertisers want you to see.
- Advertisers create their message based on what they think you will want to see and what they will think will affect you and compel you to buy their product. Just because they think their approach will work with people like you doesn't mean it has to work with you as an individual.

To help promote healthier body image messages in the media, you can:

- Talk back to the TV when you see an ad or hear a message that makes you feel bad about yourself or your body by promoting only thin body ideals.
- Write a letter to an advertiser you think is sending positive, inspiring messages that recognize and celebrate the natural diversity of human body shapes and sizes. Reinforce their courage to send positive, affirming messages.
- Tear out the pages of your magazine that contain advertisements or articles glorifying thinness or degrading people of larger sizes. Enjoy your magazine without negative media messages about your body.
- Talk to your friends about media messages and the way they make you feel.
- Make a list of companies who consistently send negative body image messages and make a conscious effort to avoid buying their products. Write them a letter explaining why you are using your "buying power" to protest their messages. Tell your family and friends about your choices.

Extension Activity

DO SOMETHING

Ask students to recreate one of the advertisements to be more inclusive of different types of people and body types. Post both the old and new ads next to each other in the classroom or in a school community space.

Alignment to Common Core State Standards CCSS SL.1, SL.2, SL.4, R.2, R.4, R.6, RI 4, RI.7, RI. 9