THE PERFECT WOMAN

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[Assignment: Write an essay classifying a group of television advertisements--ads directed at a particular segment of viewers--into recognizable types based on marketing strategy.]

Editor's Note: While not strictly a classification, this essay was deemed worthy of publication by the editorial committee for its insightful grouping of ads directed at women, at various stages of their lives. Indeed, this persuasive analysis employs more than one strategy effectively.

(1) Television advertising plays a major role in shaping American lifestyles. It helps us decide what products to buy. But even more importantly, it shapes our desires, our standards, and the goals we set for ourselves. Take, for instance, the exaggerated roles of women on television, especially in the commercials. Television commercials place women of all ages in make-believe worlds which have little meaningful relationship to daily living. These advertisements set unrealistic expectations for women in terms of what they should look like and how they should behave. Essentially, these commercials prompt women to strive for outward beauty and perfect bodies, as well as to become obsessed with cleanliness and youthfulness.

(2) From a very early age, girls are trained by the media to be beauty-conscious. Little girls are presented with commercials for beautiful Barbie and My Pretty Pony. These popular American toys reinforce the supreme value of beauty. Barbie, the long-legged, blond-haired doll, has her own beauty shop where little girls can wash and style Barbie's hair. Barbie and My Pretty Pony come equipped with hair brushes and specialized make-up. By the time the girl reaches adolescent years, she has embarked on a quest for beauty constantly reinforced by television ads. The impressionable girl is convinced by such commercials as Clearasil and Stridex that if she has a visible blemish, she will be a social outcast. The media has turned a mere case of adolescent acne into a matter of social alienation.

(3) Feminine norms of beauty remain subject to television through the rest of a woman's life. As the adolescent blossoms into womanhood, her notions of the ideal body have been shaped by countless diet commercials where ordinary women are transformed into instant sirens with slender thighs and flat stomachs. In one such advertisement a celebrity appears wearing a large, shapeless dress and eating a Weight Watchers buffet. By the end of the commercial, the celebrity flings off the gown to reveal her slim, shapely body which she claims is the result of Weight Watchers. Similar ideals are perpetuated by commercials for diet pills. One such
commercial urges women to "Eat less and lose weight with Dexatrim." These ads do not take into consideration that all women have different bone and body structures, and that not all women can achieve slim, firm bodies. Rather, these commercials imply that a woman must be slender to be attractive. They set such unreasonable expectations that many women have gone to extremes attempting to fulfill what they believe to be social norms. Bulimia and anorexia are results of the irrational demands set by the media: to be attractive is to be slim, firm, and shapely.

(4) Eventually, our woman now reaches the point when she decides to marry. She then faces the task of being a combination "super-wife" and "super-mom." As television so consistently demands, a wife must keep an immaculate house and provide the best for her family. Housewives are led to believe that they will bring shame upon their family if they have wax build-up on the coffee table or spots on the drinking glasses. The media expects housewives, such as those portrayed on Lysol, Endust, and Pine Sol commercials, to be pretty, well-dressed, and ever-smiling while doing their jobs. In addition to being a happy housewife, the woman is expected to be the ideal, self-sacrificing, indulgent mother. She should kiss her children good-bye while sending them off to school with heaping bags full of nutritional snacks. Also, she should happily scrub the deep-set mud stains out of their new pants, as well as entertain them in their leisure time. Such an ideal mom can be seen on a Coast commercial. This fashionable, well-groomed mother tumbles about the front lawn with her boys with immense enthusiasm. She smiles from ear-to-ear as the boys throw her a football and proceed to tackle her.

(5) Finally, when the woman reaches her elderly years, the media sets up another expectation--perpetual youth. At just the point when a woman can rest and relax, she is urged to recapture her youth. An example is the gray-haired woman who uses Depend undergarments for a bladder control problem. On the commercial she is seen approaching a group of people involved in an active sport. She then faces the television audience and exclaims, "I'm getting back into life with Depend!" Television ads, such as Geritol and Efferdent, also urge aging women to pursue youthful activities, to recapture their youth, and to refuse to acknowledge their age.

(6) Television advertisements have made a lasting impression on the values of women. Females from young to old are expected to follow the illusionary role models presented to them. The commercials command women to be beautiful and trim, to be ideal wives and mothers, and to stay young. These demands are impossible for every woman to meet. Instead of creating these unreal fantasies, the advertisers should make their commercials more responsive to the lives and needs of real women.
These commercials generate misconceptions about women's roles and entrap women in distorted value systems.