In our consumer culture, we live in a world saturated with advertising imagery urging us to buy and consume products as a path to future happiness and self-transformation. As Sut Jhally says in “Image-Based Culture” (Chapter 25), which introduces this section, “In the contemporary world, messages about goods are all pervasive—advertising has increasingly filled up the spaces of our daily existence . . . it is the air that we breathe as we live our daily lives.” Any discussion of the role of media within a capitalist economy has to foreground the role of advertising, both as an industry in its own right and, in Jhally’s words, as “a discourse through and about objects.” Because advertising normalizes consumption as a way of life, it is critical to our ability to think for ourselves that we learn to analyze not just the meanings of advertising texts but also the place of the advertising industry in our society.

One of the main themes running through this chapter is the way in which our deepest sense of self may be distorted in a society where advertisements are ubiquitous. As Kellner argued (in Part I), we cannot help but construct notions of ourselves at least in part from the media images that surround us, and given that the advertiser uses idealized images of ourselves to sell us products, most of us will find ourselves woefully inadequate when we compare ourselves with such images.

Gender identity is a key aspect of our sense of self from an early age, and the pervasive “ideal body” imagery offered in contemporary advertising photography is one of the most powerful and universal cultural sources of gender ideology in our society. In “The More You Subtract, the More
You Add’: Cutting Girls Down to Size” (Chapter 26), media critic Jean Kilbourne calls such images of the currently ideal or “perfect” female body a type of national peer pressure that arguably contributes to the development of eating disorders and other unhealthy behavior in adolescent girls. Using a method for analyzing gender messages in ads that was first developed by the sociologist Erving Goffman, Kilbourne argues that the adolescent girl in particular is vulnerable to “the message that she should diminish herself, she should be less than she is.”

Fashion advertising campaigns by Calvin Klein and others following in his footsteps have included male models as objects of desire for both heterosexual women and gay men, and in so doing have extended somewhat the range of masculinities visible in mainstream ads, as Susan Bordo has shown in The Male Body (1999). But most advertisers continue to work hard to ensure that only culturally dominant and binary (two diametrically opposed) versions of masculinity and femininity are produced and reproduced through advertising images and text. In “Cosmetics: A Clinique Case Study” (Chapter 27), Pat Kirkham and Alex Weller show provide a textual analysis of an advertising campaign that uses a variety of methods for coding masculine and feminine differently.

Gender representation in advertising becomes more complex when racial difference is to be represented as well, since male gender privilege is contradicted for “nonwhite” men by white supremacist history. For example, as Sanjukta Ghosh argues in “‘Con-fusing’ Exotica” (Chapter 28), when an “East Indian” male character is depicted in a magazine fashion spread, he is feminized by his clothes and heavy eye makeup, both of which code him as “inferior.” Ghosh points out that within Western advertising scenarios, non-Western cultures are represented as unchanging and “historyless,” as mysterious, sexually decadent and indolent, and steeped in traditions that kept them backward.”

Western advertising images of “nonwhite” people can be more varied today than in the past, of course, in part because of political pressure to change the racist representations of the past, and in part because many companies have come to realize that it is in their economic self-interest to appeal to new target markets. In “Advertising and People of Color” (Chapter 29), Clint Wilson and Félix Gutiérrez provide important historical perspective on racialized representation in advertising texts. After years of neglect and/or demeaning stereotyping of blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans in advertising aimed at white audiences, social protest (including boycotts) and target marketing brought significant changes to these historic practices. Especially in the case of blacks and Latinos, significant gains in visibility and in respectful representations in mass audience advertising occurred in the 1970s. Black and Latino consumers are now courted with “prestige imagery” of themselves, especially in media that target specific minority audiences (such as Spanish-language broadcasts or magazines and cable stations directed at African American viewers). Although the dollars generated by such advertising can be used by “owners of minority-formatted media . . . to better meet their social responsibility to their audience,” the authors also remind us of potential community costs associated with this new kind of advertising imagery:

The slick, upscale lifestyle used by national advertisers is more a goal than a reality for most Blacks and Latinos. It is achieved through education, hard work, and equal opportunity. Yet advertisers promote consumption of their products as the short-cut to the good life, a quick fix for low-income consumers. The message to their low-income audience is clear: You may not be able to live in the best neighborhoods, wear the best clothes, or have the best job, but you can drink the same liquor, smoke the same cigarettes, and drive the same car as those who do.
Like nonwhite populations, people with disabilities have historically been invisible or distorted in advertising imagery. Beth Haller and Sue Ralph (Chapter 30) point to the crucial role of disability rights legislation (and the disability rights movement) in making businesses aware of another new market. Beginning in the 1980s, pioneering advertisers found that the disabled customer was highly appreciative of nonstigmatizing representations in ads, and many companies came to recognize the “profitability of including disabled people in their advertising and understanding the benefits of diverse images in advertising.” Such advertising images continue to be shaped and limited by the fact that “advertising is a visual medium.” This explains both the overrepresentation of wheelchair users in disability imagery in advertising as well as the more serious problem that “only ‘pretty people’ can become models.”

So far, the chapters in this section have emphasized textual analysis, often in the context of the profit-driven production imperatives of corporate marketing. But how do different audiences actually read advertising images? Katherine Sender points out, in “Selling Sexual Subjectivities: Audiences Respond to Gay Window Advertising” (Chapter 31), that advertising research has “tended to privilege the text” as the site of meaning. Her own focus group research studied reactions of readers of different self-identified sexualities to a set of magazine advertisements she had selected, including some that offered the possibility of different readings for heterosexual and gay, lesbian, or bisexual viewers. Sender discovered that although bisexual, gay, and lesbian study participants were more likely to consider gay readings of the ads, “predictions of readings based upon sexual identification alone” were “unreliable, if not arbitrary.”

Like Sender, Diana Crane (Chapter 32) applies audience reception research techniques to explore the way audiences make meaning out of fashion advertising. Reviewing the dramatic shift in the function of fashion photography in Vogue magazine in the last half of the 20th century, Crane shows us that “exhibiting the latest trends in appropriate clothing for women of means ceased to be the primary goal of the magazine; instead fashion photographs provide a kind of visual entertainment analogous to other forms of media culture, such as Hollywood films and music videos.” Using focus groups to explore “the extent to which fashion photographs constitute a form of hegemonic femininity that is accepted as natural and incontestable by readers,” she reads the focus groups’ comments as suggesting “that they had internalized traditional norms of feminine demeanor and perceived these photographs as violating these norms” (especially when gender ambiguity or sexual assertiveness was suggested). On the other hand, her viewers did not appear to be intimidated by the beauty of the models. Nor did they apparently see fashion in the way the fashion magazine represented it: as a means of playing with identity in a postmodern manner. As with other audience response studies, Crane’s helps us see the complexity of real people’s interaction in specific social circumstances with specific media texts.

Reference