

Decision Scenario B

ADVERTISING'S IMAGE OF WOMEN

It has been estimated that U.S. children between the ages of two and five watch an average of 30 hours of television each week. At this rate, the average young person will watch some 350,000 television commercials by the end of high school. Given all forms of advertising (magazines, newspapers, packaging, radio, television) the average American will have seen some 50 million commercials by age 60. Thus advertising is inescapable in our culture, and its socializing impact cannot be ignored. Ads not only describe products but also present images, values, and goals; they portray certain concepts of normalcy and sexuality, and they promote certain types of self-images. Advertising not only aims to provide information to consumers but also aims to motivate them. What images of women does it present, and what motivations does it appeal to?

Many ads seek to motivate women by suggesting that they are inadequate without a particular product. Cosmetic ads purvey an ideal form of female beauty—a form that is unattainable. Women are portrayed as having no facial wrinkles, no lines, no blemishes—indeed, no pores. If you do not look like this, the ads suggest, you are not beautiful, and since no one (including the model) really looks like this, women need cosmetics to look beautiful. Beauty thus results from products and not from the

woman herself. Advertising tells women that they should change their age (the “little-girl look”), weight, bust size, hair color, eye color, complexion—and even their smell. In many ads a woman’s worth is measured not by her intelligence or her character or even her natural appearance. A woman’s worth is measured by how closely she approaches an ideal created by an advertising agency.

Many ads also portray women as inferior to other women and to men. Women are seen as engaged in a constant competition with other women for the attention of men. When they are pictured with men, women are often shown as clinging to the male, as passive, as submissive. Men are seen in control, active, and dominant.

Besides feelings of inadequacy, many ads also use guilt to motivate women. The “housewife” is constantly being chided because the laundry is not as white nor does it smell as clean as the neighbor’s. Her dishes have spots, her meals are unappealing, her floors and furniture have “wax buildup,” and her clothes are out of style. Even when women are shown in the role of worker rather than homemaker, feelings of guilt and inadequacy are still reinforced. The working woman is portrayed as a superwoman who harmonizes perfectly the roles of