Female Objectification in Dolce & Gabbana Advertisements

Women have been objectified throughout the history of visual media. Modern advertising continues to mass-produce hyper sexualized images, abandoning moral conscious and justifying it with the simple fact that sex sells. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggested, “objectification occurs whenever a woman’s body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (p. 175). This concept suggests that when objectified, women are treated as bodies, and more specifically, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Using the objectification theory and the concept of the male gaze, I discuss how Dolce & Gabbana objectifies women by victimizing and sexualizing them within their advertising campaigns.

Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) noted, “analyses of mainstream films, visual arts, advertisements, television programming, music videos, women’s magazines and sports photography each provide evidence that women’s bodies are targeted for sexual objectification more often than men’s” (p.176). These analyses strongly support the prevalence of the male gaze within visual media, and more specific to this paper, within advertising. Coined by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1975), the male gaze concept refers to the way visual arts are structured around a masculine viewer and the tendency in visual culture to depict the world and women from a masculine point of view and in terms of men’s attitudes. “Whereas men tend to be portrayed in print media and artwork with an emphasis on the head and face, women tend to be portrayed with an emphasis on the body” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 176). This spotlighting of bodies and body parts seamlessly aligns viewers with an implicit sexualizing gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) utilized Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze in
the construction of their objectification theory. The theory is offered as a framework for understanding the experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body. The objectification theory posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves; the observer’s perspective referring back to the male gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This sexually objectifying gaze can also be found throughout visual media in situations depicting interpersonal and social interactions. “Analyses of advertisements show that males are pictured looking directly at their female partner far more than the reverse” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 176).

In their objectification theory, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) quoted Erving Goffman on his description of the “anchored drift, a common theme in advertising in which a male is depicted starting at or monitoring a female who is looking off into the distance, daydreaming, or otherwise mentally drifting from the scene” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 176). Validation for the objectification theory and adherence to the male gaze can be found in various fashion advertisements, but they are especially prevalent in Dolce & Gabbana’s advertising campaigns.

Dolce & Gabbana is notorious for producing provocative, fetishistic, hyper sexualized advertising campaigns. These recurring sexually explicit advertising themes have had a history of sparking controversy. According to Susanna Schrobsdorff, in March 2007, D&G had to pull a highly questionable print advertisement from publications worldwide following protests in Spain, and anger from their home turf of Italy. The photo features a young woman with a blank look on her face in a bathing suit and high heels being pinned down by a sweaty shirtless man while four other men look on, insinuating the idea of gang rape (Schrobsdorff, 2007). Brand founder Stefano Gabbana refuted the idea of gang rape and demeaning women in regard to this particular advertisement, and in turn he said, “the image is artistic and was meant to recall an...
erotic dream, a sexual game." However, Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women, said that the ad indisputably promotes violence against women. Kim also mentioned that advertising like that of Dolce & Gabbana’s, bombards young girls with the message that women are there for sex and are available for sex at anytime (Schrobsdorff, 2007). Perhaps it was all the backlash Dolce & Gabbana received, that caused a drastic change in theme for their spring/summer 2012 advertising campaign. Although this drastic shift in theme seems to depict empowered women in the ads, this new series of ads ultimately sexualizes and victimizes women in more subtle ways. The subtle manner of sexualizing and victimizing women normalizes sexual violence against women, making this issue seem almost invisible to the audience.

The shift in subject matter was obvious with Dolce & Gabbana’s spring/summer 2012 campaign, which focused on the traditional Italian family instead of featuring barely clothed models or women in compromising situations. Italian families were well known to be very close social units whom were very proud of their clothing style and traditions, a cultural norm that aligned very well with the fashion brand. Dolce & Gabbana produced a series of cinematic-inspired images of a stylish Italian family in picturesque settings. This campaign appears to be empowering to women on the surface, but further insight into what actually constitutes the “traditional Italian family” uncovered a few instances of female objectivity within the theme itself. Gian Carlo Blangiardo and Stefania Rimoldi defined the Italian family as an institution that firmly relies on marriage, procreation and the relationship between parents and their children (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This ideal model of family was common and Italian women were pressured to have six or more children. Italian families operated within patriarchal units, and although the “mother” was still considered to be a dominant figure, she did not work outside of her domestic roles. Although this theme is more tasteful than their prior advertising campaigns,
The Dolce & Gabbana Italian family campaign continues to solidify the haunting presence of the male gaze and female objectification by using aesthetic tools such as figure positioning, body language and symbolism to victimize and sexualize the women featured in the advertisements.

In Figure 1, “Woman Dancing on a Table,” the male gaze and objectification of women is clear through the use of aesthetic tools including positioning, facial expression and color. The pedestal positioning of the female is a clear indication of female objectification and the male gaze at play. This is further reiterated through the symbolism present and the facial expressions and positioning of the subjects. The woman is placed within close proximity to the music instruments being played, in fact she is right in between the two instruments. This strategic placement of woman and instrument signifies that the woman’s body is also seen as something to be played with as a form of entertainment. Her positioning in the image is a clear example of the male gaze in effect. Laura Mulvey said, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11).

The image clearly depicts the pleasure in looking of the active male and passive female; every man in the image is actively participating in watching the woman dance on the table. She is “styled accordingly” in her strip tease like manner strongly emphasizing her body and body parts. The positioning of the woman on the table in this image is encouraging the male viewers to partake in this sexualizing spectacle and view this woman predominantly as a sexual object.

Another element to note is the color of clothing the subjects are wearing. Everyone is dressed in black except the apprehensive little girl dressed in all white hiding in the background.
The color black typically symbolizes power, intimidation, elegance and sophistication. Black also represents sexiness and seduction, which is absolutely evident in this image. The dancing woman is portrayed as a temptress; clad in her little black dress, which could be mistaken for lacy lingerie. Contrastingly the color white signifies innocence, goodness, purity, and virginity.

Despite the fact that some of the men are wearing white shirts, their ogling of the dancing woman marks them as sexually aggressive rather than virginal and chaste. The only person dressed in pure white is the young girl in the background. There is a drastic age difference between her and the adults in the scene. The mature adults dressed in black, have a solid understanding of their heterosexuality compared to the virginal ignorance of the little girl dressed in white. She is a symbol of chastity looming in the background, disconnected from the rest of the sexualized scene.

In addition to the symbolic colors used, the facial expressions and body positioning of the subjects also reinforce the male gaze and the objectified female. Almost everyone in this picture is staring at the women dancing on the table. The woman’s body is presented as a curvy figure, accentuating her chest, thighs and butt. Her body language is sexual, as she grabs her hair, flaunts her chest and pulls up her dress for everyone to see. This is a clear example of the “anchored drift” theme (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Every male in this scene is staring and or monitoring the woman dancing on the table. The woman’s upward held tilt and facial expression shows a mental disconnection from the scene. She is smiling but looking away from the men starting at her, like she is daydreaming and unconscious of the sexual victimization she is undergoing. In fact it is safe to assume that this female is exemplifying the objectification theory, in the sense that she has internalized the male observer’s perspective on her physical self. She is
treated herself as an object to be looked at and evaluated by her male onlookers (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Although the little girl is also staring at the woman, her facial expression is not one of pleasure, but of apprehension. It looks like she may be clapping along with everyone else, but she is hiding behind the older woman in the chair and her teeth are clenched and. This element of the image is foreshadowing the sexual objectification she will also have to endure in the future. All the other subjects in the scene have pleasurable facial expressions and body positioning’s focusing on the woman dancing on the table, actively participating in the male gaze. Since the little girl is the only one in the scene who is clearly a virgin, her apprehensive facial expression and body positioning prove she is uncomfortable with the sexual objectification of the female on the table. Additionally, the apprehensive appearance of the young girl also supports another aspect of the objectification theory. Adolescence marks a particularly troubling passage for girls, they become self-conscious about their rapidly changing body during puberty. It is proposed that during this time, girls learn that this new body belongs less to them and more to others. “Empirical studies document that with the changes of puberty, a girl’s new body in a sense becomes “public domain”: It is increasingly looked at, commented on, and otherwise evaluated by others” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 193). Fredrickson and Roberts referenced a study by Karin Martin focusing on adolescents’ personal experiences with puberty and their emerging sexuality strongly supports this claim. In Martin’s study, the girls conveyed that males “notice” and comment on their developing breasts, in turn coming to the conclusion that a girl with bigger breasts is more sexually available (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggested that perhaps for the first time, then, and adolescent girl recognizes that
she will be seen and evaluated by others as a body, not as herself. With pubertal changes, then, a girl becomes more fully initiated into the culture of sexual objectification (p. 194).

The presence of female victimization and sexual objectification, as well as the male gaze lingers in Figure 2, “Women on a Boat” featuring three women wearing cage-like, wicker corsets. The wicker corsets on the three women in the beach ad quite literally symbolize their sexual objectification. The corsets place emphasis on their bodies; they accentuate their breasts, waists and hips. The woman in the front’s corset even has a thick linear braid where her vagina is, creating a phallic representation. The main symbolism, and indication of sexual victimization, of the corsets is that it appears to be more like a cage than a garment. This reference of the cage alludes to a fact within the context of the male gaze, that women are enslaved to their own bodies in the sense that they are seen solely as sexual objects. However, there is one woman who is not caged within a corset like the rest of the women. The absence of this corset leads to an interpretation that the male viewer sees her as the least attractive woman in the image. Her body type is more slender and lanky compared to the curvy figures of the other women. Her eyebrows are not arched and appear un-groomed, her facial expression is the least seductive of the four, and she has on the most clothing. She is victimized and objectified in the sense that she isn’t seen to be as desirable to men as the other three women are. Also, the context of the beach scene carries a few sexual representations within itself.

The boat itself is another phallic reference. It is an object whose main purpose is to navigate through water; the ocean being a common representation of the vagina. The phallic symbolism of the boat is strongly supported by the body language of the woman sitting on it. Her hand is gripping a red wood spoke, which coincidentally is about the exact same size of a human penis. The woman appears to be giving the “spoke” a hand job. The fact that it is red also
supports this claim. Red signifies passion, lust and blood. Blood flushes through and engorges
the male penis when it is stimulated and erect. The woman is also adhering to the “anchored
drift” theme; she is the only one who is not looking directly at the viewer. The fact that she is not
looking directly at the viewer, allows her to be perceived as a sexual object solely for the purpose
of sexual stimulation for the male penis.

The eldest male in the background of the beach scene is a direct reference to the male
gaze. He is looking directly at the women, and if you look closely, his belt is unbuckled. The
close proximity of the boat to his waist could signify that the boat is a reference to his own penis,
instead of a more general phallic symbol. This backs up the concept of the male gaze because he
is looking upon these women solely as sexual objects to utilize for his own sexual pleasure. The
objectification theory can also be tied in here because the women are all are posing in ways to
accentuate their bodies. The woman on the left has her arms spread apart pushing off the boat
behind her, welcoming the viewer to glance at her figure from a full front angle. The woman on
the right has her hand on her hip and the other on the boat, her head cocked to the side, as if she
knows she is attractive to the male onlooker. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) mentioned how
empirical research demonstrates that how a woman’s body appears to others can determine her
life experiences. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) also mentioned how Rhonda Unger argued that
physical beauty can translate to power for women. Attractiveness functions as a prime currency
for women’s social and economic success. However, a woman’s beauty must appeal to the tastes
of the dominant White male culture (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Aida Hurtado argued “that
the dominant White male culture typically oppresses White woman through “seduction,” which
we suggest is often enacted through sexual objectification masquerading as positively valenced
admiration” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 178). That is exactly what is happening here
within the context of this particular image. The women believe that because they are physically attractive, that they hold power over men, when in reality this is just an inadvertent form of their own introspective sexual objectification.

Further instances of sexual objectification and the male gaze are also present within Figure 3, “Bakers and Bread.” This advertisement features a scene incorporating many men, women, and lots of bread. Back to the ideals of the traditional Italian family, the men where the members of the family who worked jobs for a living. Most of the men in this image are presented as bakers, a respectable career for an Italian man to have. Bread in Italian culture carries several different symbolic connotations including celebrations, religious blessings, sacrifices, and rebirth. But according to Carol Field (2011), “the simple aromatic breads of the countryside are more than the flavors and smells of an ancient culture: they are rife with sexual symbolism, too. The *banana* and *barlino* from the Emilia-Romagna region and various Venetian breads are rolled into unmistakably phallic shapes” (Field, 2011, p. 7). This symbolism becomes even more apparent when noticing that the man in the background is holding a loaf by his waist, imitating an erection. Sexual objectification is quite obvious when taking into account the phallic symbolism of the bread loaf that the woman on the left is eating. Adhering to the male gaze, the men are starting at her in a fetishistic manner, imagining that it was their penis she was putting in her mouth. The woman eating the bread is also looking directly at the viewer, in a seductive, sexually teasing manner.

More sexual objectification occurs in the right of the image, where a man appears to be playfully thrusting behind a woman dressed in a metallic gold dress. The woman is unaware of his sexual body language behind her, again referring back to the “anchored drift” theme (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). She appears to be totally disconnected from the scene, looking
up at the sky as if she were daydreaming. Her body language is stiff and almost robotic in nature. Her dress appears to be made up of gold medals, symbolizing her as a trophy. Both her body language and her dress help to shape the conclusion that she is seen solely as an object to men. Perhaps the trophy reference coupled with the thrusting body language of the man behind her, insinuates that the biggest reward or achievement for the male is to have sex with the woman.

Compared to their previous, more scandalous advertising campaigns, Dolce & Gabbana’s Italian family campaign appears to empower women on the surface. However, through deeper analyses of these three advertisements, the Italian family campaign continues to solidify the presence of the male gaze and female objectification through use of aesthetic tools including figure positioning, body language and symbolism to victimize and sexualize women. In Figure 1 “Woman Dancing on a Table,” the pedestal positioning of the woman clearly exemplifies an active sexual male gaze. The male viewer is influenced by this inherent gaze to stare at the woman in a sexualizing, victimizing manner. The body language of the woman sitting on the boat in Figure 2 “Women on a Boat,” is recognized immediately as sexual innuendo. She grasps the red wood spoke like she would grasp a male penis. Her body language reiterates the concept of the male gaze in the sense that male viewers see her mainly as a sexual object, solely for the purpose of sexual stimulation of the male penis. The phallic symbolism in Figure 3 “Bakers and Bread,” further solidifies the adherence to the male gaze and female objectification. The bread loaf being positioned as if it were an erection coupled with the woman eating the loaf of bread, is clear symbolic reference for the penis. This strong use of phallic symbolism reiterates the presence of the male gaze and female sexual objectification. Although Dolce & Gabbana’s Italian family campaign could have been perceived as positive and empowering for women to the ignorant eye, this deeper analysis into the advertising campaign proved that the concept of the
male gaze and the female objectification theory is still in play through the deliberate use of aesthetic tools that continue to sexualize and victimize women.
Figure 1. “Woman Dancing on a Table”
Figure 2. “Women on a Boat”
Figure 3: “Bakers and Bread”
References


