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Viewing Ruby: *A Barbie Campaigning for Self-Esteem*

Pulling the stack of bills and magazines from her black mailbox, she catches sight of Sarah Michelle Geller's purple skirt resting strategically below her protruding hip bone and her long blond hair flowing through the title of this month's "Seventeen" magazine. "She's so beautiful," sighs the girl before thumbing through the rest of the pile.

Airbrushed images of unnaturally thin women pervade the media, forming false representations of health and beauty. Overemphasis of these images by printed ads and television media defines them as normal and fosters insecurities in individuals who have the intrinsic desire to conform. When Cindy Crawford promotes *24 Hour Fitness* in commercials and Molly Sims critiques fashion on MTV, television portrays these women as examples of physical perfection. In 1997, the international bath and body retailer known for its frontline social campaigns *The Body Shop* battled unhealthy stereotypes with Ruby, an overweight yet confident Barbie® parody

Figure has been removed in compliance with copyright regulations. To see the image, please go to

<http://www.johnriviello.com/bodyimage/dolls.html#ruby>

Fig 1: "Ruby". Advertisement. April 10, 2003.

<http://www.johnriviello.com/bodyimage/dolls.html>

(See Fig. 1). Before they were banned in several nations, Ruby posters proudly adorned store windows everywhere.

White lettering reading, "There are 3

billion women who don't look like

supermodels and only 8 that do," serves

as a statistical supplement to the

persuasive visual distortion of a conventional Barbie doll. The combination of visual and written text in this ad serves as a general disclaimer for the entire visual media world; it reminds women

that confidence need not be analogous to weight and addresses deeply controversial concerns about the power of media's images to lower self-esteem.

Self-esteem campaigns joined the ranks of *The Body Shop's* many endeavors in 1995 but did not have such substantial influence until the introduction of Ruby as a key visual endorsement two years later. The debut of "a real doll representing real women" turned heads as people stopped to examine her shocking image (*Activate Self Esteem*, screen 1). At first glance Ruby looks like the average Barbie doll. A closer examination however, reveals a hybrid of a larger-than-life Barbie combined with the-lady-next-door. This hybrid embodies a confident individual daydreaming comfortably with her head propped above the arm of her love-seat. Since Barbie has been an internationally identifiable icon for several decades, the parody is immediately recognizable. Barbie's universally recognized plastic smile implies certain associations. Barbie is an ideal—she's sexy, stylish, secure, and has the complete attention of her equally desirable (yet equally plastic) male counterpart, Ken. The campaign relies on Barbie's well-established *ethos* to communicate Ruby's positive characteristics. In preserving the original doll's dreamy facial expression, *The Body Shop* implies that Ruby's heavier figure does not alter the Barbie persona or cause her to view herself as any less sexy or secure. Posed provocatively on the love-seat, she is not hiding her body; the casual positioning merits her Barbie's confidence. Mattel® ignored *The Body Shop's* love-yourself-like-you-love-Barbie reasoning and instead sued for an overt attack on Barbie (Rivelle, screen 1). Though the ad does humor truths about the original plastic doll's anatomical impossibilities, the ad is meant to not openly attack Barbie, but to *use* her face as a symbol of self-confidence. Ruby separates this self-esteem from its presumed dependence on perceived physical ideals.

The statistical comment on the ad enhances the campaign's message: just as average women do not look like plastic dolls, they clearly do not look like supermodels either.

Unfortunately, the campaign battles media stereotypes that are deeply imbedded in society's collective subconscious. When the same eight supermodels appear repeatedly on the covers of fashion magazines, the media falsely communicates that these unnaturally skinny women define attractiveness. Though people acknowledge this absurdity, imprinting of the repeated images is unavoidable. Ruby poses in a typically seductive supermodel position. With her hand resting easily on her imperfect thigh, she counters unhealthy beauty standards. The ad effectively impacts even before the viewer reads the explicitly written statement in the corner. This clearly stated fact does, however, serve a purpose: it further substantiates Ruby as a representative voice for a larger population. While supermodel photos may decorate millions of billboards and store window displays for every one poster of Ruby at *The Body Shop*, the models, not Ruby, are the minority in real life. The campaign maintains a *logos* appeal with a logical argument to remind audiences that the supermodel body, though prevalent in media, is a rare extreme. Striving to imitate it is an unrealistic goal. The Ruby relaxing on the love-seat represents an entire population, not just a single-individual or industry. The reality that full communication of such a startling statistic requires it to be so blatantly stated indicates the frightening level to which these unattainable ideals have become "the norm" in publications.

Since the ad targeted such a large audience, responses varied widely. Many applauded, some were slightly disturbed, and others simply appreciated the ad for its clever *humos* appeal. *The Body Shop* intentionally exaggerated Ruby's weight to use her as a rhetorical tool. Certainly every "average" woman is not identical to Ruby. Key physiological details are clearly just as absent on Ruby as they would be on any doll. It cannot be forgotten that she is a parody--she is plastic! Ruby is a humorous response to a serious social concern. "Ruby started as humor, teasing traditional notions of how women are presented," comments *The Body Shop* spokeswoman Paulette Cleghorn (qtd. in *Barbie's New Bod*, screen 1). Though a glance at Ruby

does not incite fits of uncontrollable laughter, the irony of the overweight plastic doll captivates. Dolls are not generally made with imperfections. Fantasy makes them appealing—they are not supposed to be realistic. Ruby's weight far exceeds what most would expect for a doll, encouraging viewers to chuckle about the silliness of the parody before actually taking note of its social criticisms.

Nevertheless, the emotional baggage generally associated with weight concerns makes it impossible for most people to take Ruby at face value. The *pathos* appeal of the overweight image immediately invokes a response in individuals with past troubles or traumatic weight-related experiences. *The Body Shop*, as a wildly liberal organization, undoubtedly expected to shock the general public. Even so, the eruption following Ruby's debut surprised even them! The extreme emotional response elicited evidences the severity of societal troubles associated with negative self-image in today's world. Distorted portrayals of women easily aggravate already existing insecurities. Self-doubting women have difficulty honestly understanding that companies like *Abercrombie* advertise clothing that fits differently on the models' unnaturally thin bodies and on manikins than it should on customers in a store dressing room. Advertisements for the clothing retailers communicate an implied association between the clothing their models wear and a sexual appeal. Consumers further distort this parallel and connect not just the actual clothing, but also how it fits to that desired sex appeal. Striving for this perfection tortures young women, causing them to believe, unreasonably, that they need to achieve physical impossibilities before they are allowed to feel positively confident about themselves. Ruby's body language and glowing face contradict the general notion that confidence is a product of a thin waist and small thighs. This refreshing perspective encourages women to make a strong distinction between a healthy mindset and an overly thin and unhealthy body that conforms to media stereotypes.

The public's support coupled with a desire to overcome the media's opposition encouraged *The Body Shop* to continue and expand on the Ruby campaign. "We've had a huge response—positive, positive, positive—to Ruby," describes Cleghorn (qtd. in *Barbie's New Bod*, screen 1). The momentum of this reaction excited initial plans to actually manufacture a doll version of Ruby. The explosive aftermath of this campaign proves visual rhetoric's dynamic nature and the audience's influence to increase a text's power by simply responding passionately to its message. The *ethos* appeal of Barbie's face together with the logical statement that women are not naturally a size triple zero were intentional tools used by *The Body Shop* to communicate the importance of self-confidence independent of physical image. Nevertheless, the existing insecure emotional status of the audience prompted an extreme *pathos* response, arguably the most effective appeal of the campaign. As individuals embraced Ruby as a comfort to their own insecurities, they impacted the campaign and transformed it from simple humor to an assault on unreasonable social ideals. By relating to the figure reclining on the sofa, people invited *The Body Shop's* goal for the audience to share in Ruby's confidence. Today, visitors to *The Body Shop* official web page can click the link to "Activate Self Esteem" and view an illustration of a new Ruby. This brunette version no longer has Barbie's face, but operates under the campaign's own established *ethos*. Visual images of Ruby will always symbolize individual strength and improved self-esteem.

Works Cited

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