

Crossing the Line

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### Abstract

This essay is about how advertisements use fear to bring awareness to an issue. The example of this is an advertisement from the childhood obesity campaign that the Healthcare Center of Atlanta created. It was evident that this campaign took a much harsher approach when addressing the issue and seemed to tackle insecurities rather than obesity itself. This essay examines the advertisement and the techniques used to persuade its viewers and how such techniques affect those watching it.

*Keywords:* Media Analysis, Healthcare Center of Atlanta, Obesity, Fear, Shame, Appearance, Youth

### Crossing the Line

Spreading awareness is something of great value. It sheds light to problems that one may not have been aware of, and assists in getting a certain issue solved or on the path of finding a solution. It is a great way to get others motivated for a cause. Of course these causes are brought out in many advertisements. Whether it be on TV commercials, flyers or giant billboards--there is always some way to get a message across. As Davis (1992) states in his article "The Power of Images: Creating the Myths of our Time," "in our culture pictures have become tools used to elicit specific and planned emotional reactions in the people who see them" ("What are Images?" para. 1). Images are what make people feel something and getting the people to get emotional about anything means that the advertisement is working. Although awareness is a good thing, advertisers can sometimes come across hurtful rather than helpful. An ad from the Children's Healthcare Center of Atlanta tries to create awareness of childhood obesity and tries to use motivation and emotion to change behaviors, but instead, like many other ads, they use fear and shame to address the issue, causing only more problems.

Childhood obesity is a very important thing in this nation, and action is needed to help get children on a path to a better lifestyle so that they can live a healthy long lives. In a recent campaign to help spread awareness of childhood obesity, the Children's Healthcare Center of Atlanta had a couple billboards put up that included an image of a young girl. The image is in black and white and shows the overweight child crossing her arms with a very serious look on her face. Her hair falls straight behind her ears, accentuating her face. The background is blurred making the child the focus of the image. Below her is a large warning that is in red capital letters. Underneath the warning is a saying that also happens to be in capital letters that reads, "It's hard to be a little girl if you're not" (as cited in Rochman, 2012).

At first glance it seems like a harmless picture but once the eye catches that large warning sign the aura of the image changes, so instead of examining the picture as a whole, the eyes naturally gravitate to the bright colors and read what the warning label has to say first then it allows the eyes to navigate the rest of the image. Now viewers are seeing the image in a different light, instead of just seeing a black and white image of a child, it is now a sad case of obesity consuming this little girl's body because after all no little girl should look like that. The image being in black in white gives viewers a raw look at the child. Although there is no color, black and white images give a sense of an unaltered and unfiltered truth. It makes viewers look at every detail just as if they were examining a photo from the late 1800s. The image also seems to be taken at a low angle, this makes the child seem bigger than she already is. It's almost as if the young girl can tower over other children her age, and this of course is in a negative light. It implies that a child whom looks like this is in great danger and that her weight no longer allows her to be a little girl. The campaign is implementing fear to parents who may have a child with similar characteristics and are essentially saying that this is no way a child should look. Lopez (2004) addresses this in his article "Advertising Analysis" and states that, "Fear messages are directed at our insecurities, such as "no one will like you if you have dandruff," or "bald people are losers" (p. 2). The image as a whole insists that this is kind of physical appearance is unethical and ruins the image of what a little girl needs to be.

Instead of spreading awareness and offering a solution this advertisement takes a harsh approach and demeans overweight children; more specifically, it demeans young girls. By stating, "It's hard to be a little girl if you're not," the campaign focuses on gender stereotypes (as cited in Rochman, 2012). Girls are always sought out to be dainty, delicate and beautiful little creatures that when anything opposes this it suddenly means that there's something wrong. This

image is now telling young girls that if they look like this they are not beautiful and that the way they look is shameful. Instead of tackling a real issue the advertisement uses shame and the female stereotypes to make young girls want to change their appearance, not because of health, but because of beauty.

At such a young age advertisements strip away our innocence. Things that never seemed to be a problem to our self esteem now make us question ourselves and our appearance. If we look a certain way and do things that are expected from us then life will go right, but this isn't the case. It's hard to see that advertisements, at the end of the day, are just advertisements especially for today's youth. It is important to address health issues and spread awareness, but when advertising such things, it is even more important to address actual facts and offer solutions to such problems, instead of targeting insecurities to scare people enough to change. There is a very thin line between tackling a problem and fixing it, to addressing an issue in order to create more issues. This is a line that should never be crossed.

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