Author Jean Kilbourne addresses sexualization of women in advertising

Filmmaker and writer Jean Kilbourne delivers the Town Hall Celebrity Lecture on women in advertising at the Michigan Union on Thursday.

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Jean Kilbourne, renowned scholar, author and filmmaker, discussed the objectification of women in advertising — a matter she began exploring in the late 1960s — to a crowd of over 350 Ann Arbor residents on Thursday afternoon.
the three most popular speakers on college campuses. Her books “Can’t Buy My Love” and “So Sexy So Soon” as well as her film “Killing Us Softly: Advertising’s Image of Women” have garnered international acclaim.

Her presentation featured countless examples of the types of misogynistic advertisements seen in the media. She explains she focuses on advertising’s portrayal of women, since those images have the ability be a powerful force of education in society. She explained the average American views over 3,000 advertisements each day, and spends two years of their life watching television commercials alone.

Kilbourne noted advertisements are everywhere, and she said it is striking how influential this form of commercialism has become for extremely young children. She mentioned some parents even auction off the right to name their babies after a brand in order to receive a certain amount of money.

“Marketers have found that babies at the age of six months can recognize corporate logos, and that’s the age in which they’re starting to target our children, at the age of six months,” she said.

Although there are more advertisements circulating now than ever before, Kilbourne said she found the majority of people believe these ads don’t affect them and they have the ability to “tune them out.”

However, she also found people are willing to spend larger amounts of money on a certain brand because that specific brand’s advertisement was able to create a more lasting image in the mind of the consumer, even though this consumer would most likely not be able to tell the difference between brands if they were blindfolded.

Kilbourne continued by explaining the unattainable expectations often set by advertisements and media outlets that use Photoshop and retouching tools. She said research has shown such displays affect women’s self-esteem as well as men’s views of the women in their lives. Although men are subjected to Photoshop as well, often made to appear bigger or stronger, Kilbourne explained the use of these applications has a much more drastic effect on women — especially women of color.

“It’s an impossible ideal for everyone, but it’s particularly impossible for women of color who are considered beautiful only insofar as they approximate the white ideal: light skin, straight hair, caucasian features,” she said. “Even Beyonce’s skin was often lightened in ads.”
Kilbourne said the models seen in advertisements are often made to appear extremely thin with large breasts, emulating the societal notion that expects women to be “sexy but innocent, experienced but virginal.” In one image displayed during her presentation, a model for Ralph Lauren was seen with a head wider than her body — a feature anatomically impossible.

As these images become more and more prevalent in a world surrounded by technology, they continue to affect young girls in harmful ways. Kilbourne spoke of the desire to be what is considered “sexy.” She said while there is nothing wrong with this desire, the problem comes from the obsessive pursuit of these unattainable qualities, which makes young girls more prone to depression, eating disorders and low self-esteem. She stated 91 percent of cosmetic surgery procedures are done on women, and sometimes these surgeries are given as gifts to girls for their high school graduations.

What’s worse, she said, is many advertisements also contain references to sexual abuse and violence, because “cutting girls down to size also means silencing them.”

In her presentation, Kilbourne cited several statistics: at least one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused during childhood; battering is the single greatest cause for injury of women in America; and a third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husband or male partner.

Kilbourne said advertisements including images of women being followed by shadowy figures in the background, surrounded by the hands of touchy men, or even being gang-raped, are what continue to fuel rape culture and violence towards women.

“It normalizes violence against women and it also eroticizes it,” she said. “Violent images make some people more violent, they make all of us more callous to violence and more likely to blame the victim. But the worst thing to do is to link sex and violence, and of course that happens all the time.”

At the end of the lecture, Kilbourne affirmed sexual violence problems are public health issues affecting all people, not just women. She spoke of the importance of becoming involved in whatever motivates change in the culture behind not only advertisements but attitudes as well.

Taubman student Natsume Ono said while she feels sexism and the degradation of women in media has always been a major issue, only recently has the increase in technology made society acknowledge the problem.

“Because of how quickly things can be spread in our culture now, I think that’s why we think that it’s gotten so awful,” she said. “But it’s just exposing what certain people have always thought.”
Jonathan Hull, Music, Theater & Dance freshman, said he recently experienced such sexism first hand when he had an Uber driver who stopped to take pictures of a group of girls filming a video outside of their sorority house, referring to them as “bitches” and other derogatory terms. Hull agreed demeaning acts such as these are very prevalent in the media and present a major problem.

“It’s a very patriarchal system, and they just sexualize women because they know men will respond positively to having really attractive women in their ads,” he said. “To me it’s not surprising that women have been sexualized just because there are men at the top of the hierarchy of advertising. But it is really alarming, just because you shouldn’t have to depend on the sexualization of a gender to sell a product, the product should be able to stand on its own.”