

The Beauty of Animal Rights

A Content Analysis of Human Bodies in PETA Advertisements

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Introduction

It is not new news that PETA engages in controversial advertising practices. It is quite common to see naked people, bloodied animal carcasses, and cringe-worthy headlines -- usually asking the audience to switch to vegetarianism, stop buying fur coats, or quit using products from companies that engage in unethical animal testing. The shock value of these ads certainly makes people notice -- whether it's something raunchy, gory, or ridiculous. Many people argue that PETA frequently goes too far.

For example, in 2016, PETA released a video that compared pigs and cows born into the food industry to survivors of sexual assault. Many people protested the ad, claiming it was insensitive to victims of sexual violence, but PETA stood its ground (Shapiro, 2016).

PETA fully acknowledges its controversial advertising tactics, saying, "It is sometimes necessary to shake people up in order to initiate discussion, debate, questioning of the status quo, and, of course, action" (*Why Does PETA Use Controversial Tactics?*). The word "controversial" is vague and almost noble, taking little responsibility for the very real possibility that these ads do just as much harm as good.

Though there are many controversial aspects of PETA ads, this paper will focus on the use of female and male human bodies.

In PETA's ads, the use of a human is meant to humanize the animals and make people care about other species. The idea is -- *you wouldn't want this to happen to a human, so why do we let it happen to non-human animals?* In order for this tactic to work, the human depicted must be someone obviously *valuable* and someone we as consumers care about. So, as far as humans go, who is considered valuable?

In this content analysis, this is the question I seek to answer: which humans are considered valuable and what does the presence/usage of human bodies say about human-animal relationships?

Method

Because PETA is such a huge organization with so many campaigns and ads, I decided to find my sample using Google. I simply searched “PETA Ads.” I studied the first full page of images. However, I only coded ads that included at least one adult human. I excluded ads featuring only other animals, only text, only human babies, etc. I only coded for still ads -- so that includes billboard images, magazine ads, etc. I did not include TV commercials or PSA video ads. I did not sort based on year, but all the ads are from fairly recent campaigns (i.e. the Let Vegetarianism Grow On You campaign started in 2007 and the Ink Not Mink campaign started in 2010). None of the ads I studied were what we might call “retro.” I relied on Google to sort for me based on popularity and most viewed. In total, I looked at 180 ads. Most of the ads featured a single adult human, but some featured a small group of people, a couple, or a human with his/her companion animal.

Findings

Overall, it seems that stereotypical, normative beauty standards define value for humans. Another immediate takeaway is that women’s bodies are used with much greater frequency than men’s bodies: in total, there were 124 women depicted and 56 men.

Often the person in the ad is a celebrity -- a conventionally attractive person. This implies, of course, that the most valuable people are those who live up to the (let’s face it,

impossible) beauty ideals we have in America. The subliminal messages come through loud and clear. Overall, a beautiful woman is white, young, thin with big breasts, and is often vulnerable -- often due to the setup of the ad (woman as meat, brutalized, or in a cage) or due to doe-eyes and body positioning. Men, on the other hand, are strong, muscular, tall, and dominant.

In addition to perpetuating gender roles and expectations, these ads also engage in size-ism, racism, and ageism. This content analysis became intersectional very quickly. I will break down my findings in the following sub-sections.

It seems that, in its efforts to be shocking, PETA is simply reinforcing unfortunate stereotypes and expectations humans created for ourselves long ago. And there is nothing shocking about *that*.

I. Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity

Perhaps not surprisingly, PETA ads perpetuate what we've been told again and again about the way men and women *ought* to be. Men should embody hegemonic masculinity and women should embody emphasized femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is the

dominant, most rewarded form of masculinity and requires men to be tall, strong, white, cis-gender, heterosexual, middle/upper class, aggressive, dominant, tough, and sexually experienced (this should sound familiar since this type of

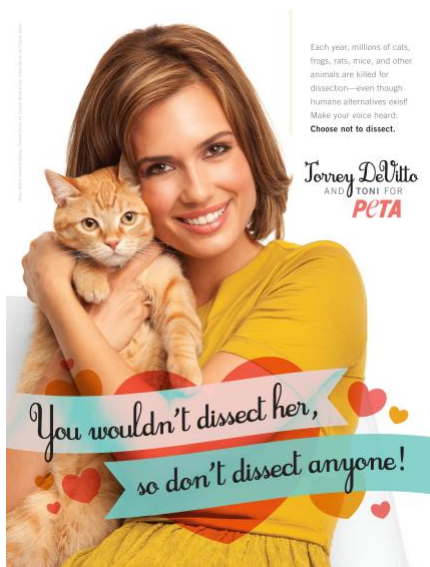


Image 2

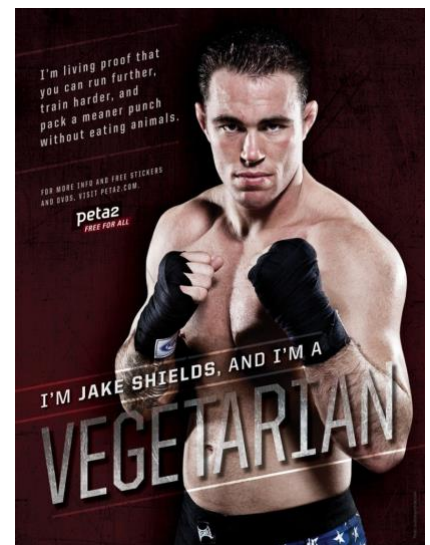


Image 1

masculinity is the most frequently depicted and perpetuated in the media). Emphasized femininity -- a term originally coined by Raewyn Connell (1987) -- occurs when women submit to or accommodate the interests of men and are passive, pretty, nurturing, etc. Hegemonic masculinity relies on emphasized femininity. The PETA ads unwaveringly depict hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. The women are sensuous and/or cute while the men are virile and powerful. Most of the women depicted are hyper-feminine and most of the men depicted are hyper-masculine (image 1 and 2).

A huge part of hegemonic masculinity is a man's sexual prowess. PETA speaks directly to men about their ability to get an erection (image 3 and 4). The ads suggest that going vegetarian will help men "get it up."



Image 3

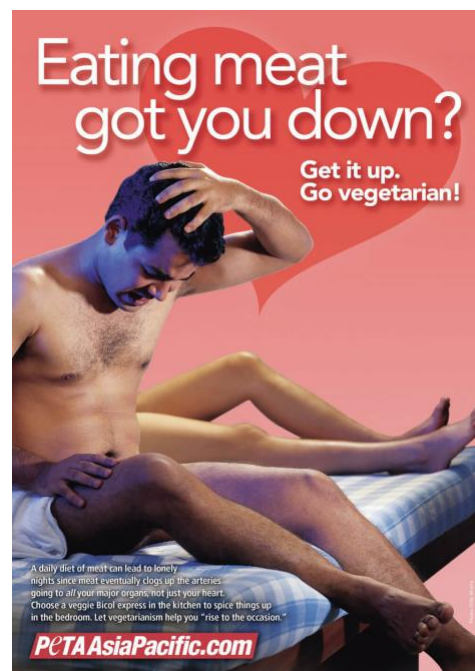


Image 4

The women, on the other hand, are promised angelic or goddess-like status for being kind to animals (image 5 and 6), which is precisely the embodiment of emphasized femininity.



Image 5



Image 6

II. Size-ism

In *The Cult of Thinness*, Hesse-Biber (2007) discusses the enormous pressure we put on ourselves to not be *fat* -- particularly women. Hesse-Biber argues, "Cultural messages on the rewards of thinness and the punishments of obesity are everywhere" (p. 20). A woman's worth is especially tied to physical appearance, and weight especially is a point of concern. Hesse-Biber notes, "Many women experience even a few extra pounds as a major issue in their lives" (p. 110). This is easy to believe when we look at media messages -- and PETA is no exception.

Of the 124 ads of women, 123 featured thin women. This is true of women of all races/ethnicities depicted. Some of the women were a bit curvier than others, but even the

women with fuller figures were very toned and slim. The ads make sure to give consumers a good view of female bodies. If a woman isn't totally naked in the ad, it is likely she is wearing very little or that her outfit is (unnecessarily) suggestive. See some examples of (perhaps unrealistically) thin models (image 7-9).



Image 7



Image 8

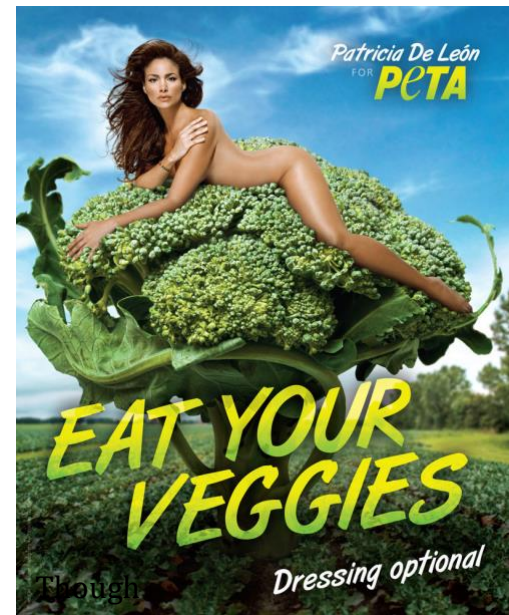


Image 9

Though we usually focus on the objectification of female bodies and the high pressure we place on them to be thin, it would be remiss to not mention the male counterpart. Male bodies are expected to be muscular and Adonis-like. In their book *Gendered Bodies*, Lorber and Moore (2011) discuss the pressures placed on male bodies: "In Western contemporary cultures, a sampling of popular images would



Image 10

suggest that the ideal male body is over six feet tall, 180-200 pounds, muscular, agile, with straight white teeth, a washboard stomach, six-pack abs, long legs, a full head of hair, a large penis (discreetly shown by a bulge), broad shoulders and chest, strong muscular back, clean-shaven, healthy..." (p. 90). PETA ads reinforce these expectations. Though some of the men did have clothes on, many sported their six-packs in half-naked or all-naked shots (image 10-12).

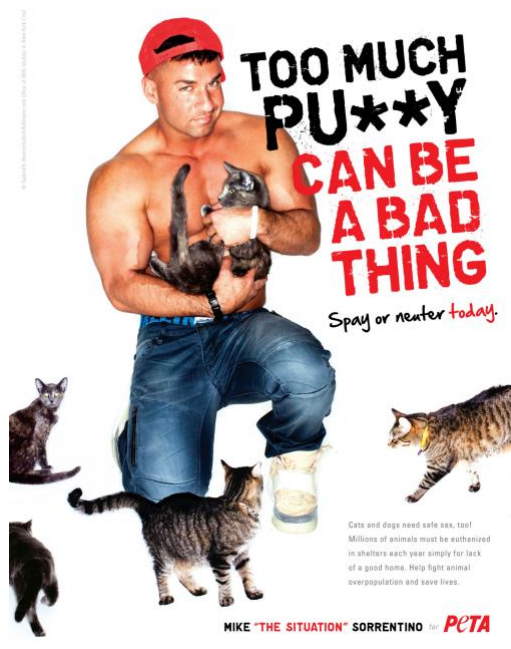


Image 11



Image 12

The messages in PETA ads are often about vegetarianism and veganism serving as excellent weight-loss tools. This in itself isn't particularly problematic, but the way PETA conveys this idea is incredibly insulting to people of size (See image 13 and 14).



Image 13



Image 14

III. Racism

Of the 180 ads I studied, there were 129 white people featured and 51 people of

color (any non-white race/ethnicity). This is problematic on many levels, but two stand out.

First of all, *not* including people of color in advertising (and the media in general) makes huge groups of people invisible. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that non-white children will outnumber white children by 2020; further, by 2044, the Census predicts that no single racial/ethnic group will be a

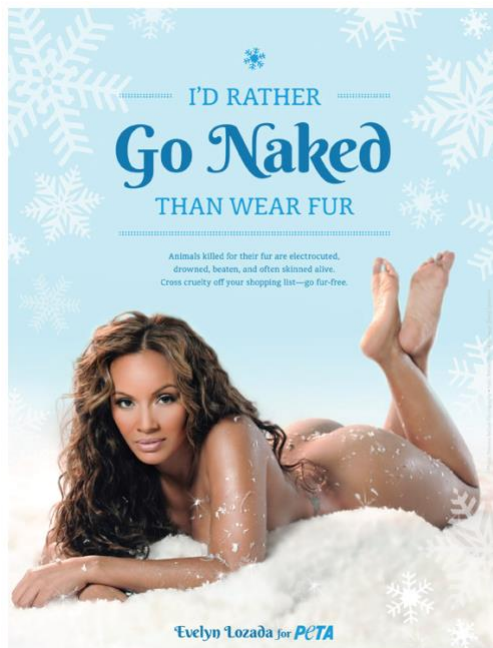


Image 15

clear majority (Chappell, 2015). Yet, depictions of white people still dominate. What happens often is that white is viewed as the “default.” But white is not a default at all. White is a race just like any other.

Secondly, the people of color that *are* depicted have relatively light skin and Western features. This is not unique to PETA. Saltzberg and Chrisler (1995) point out, “the beauty standard idealizes Caucasian features and devalues those of other races... Asian American and

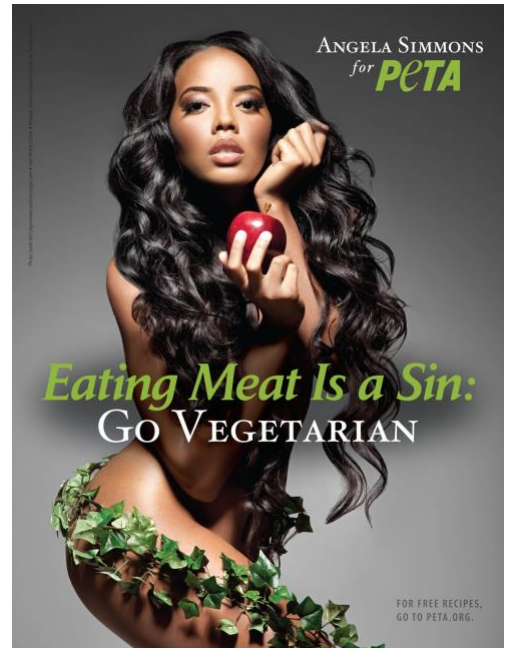


Image 16

African-American women have sought facial surgery in order to come closer to the beauty ideal” (n.p.). Further, Patton explains in her article “Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?” (2006) that African American models in the media “have very light skin (some models could be mistaken for Euro Americans), some have blue or green

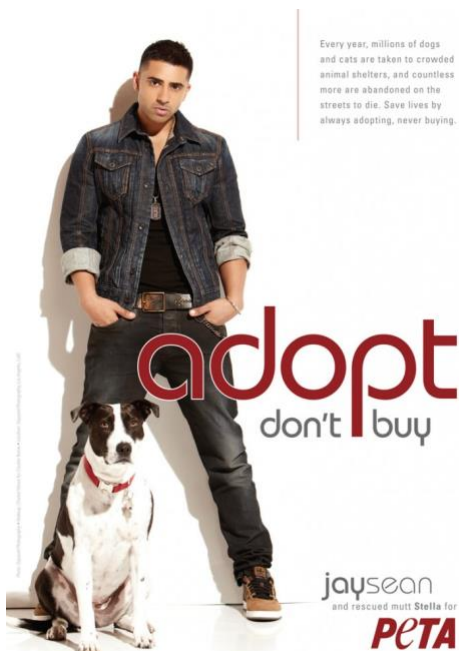


Image 17

eyes, and most of them have long, straight or wavy hair” (p. 39). Patton traces this preference for whiter-looking black individuals to slavery when lighter-skinned slaves were treated relatively better and were put to work in houses rather than in the more brutal setting of the fields. (See image 15-17).

IV. Ageism

Ageism is an increasing problem and occurs when a preference is shown for young people and older people experience discrimination. The World Health Organization lists some of the problems aging people face: diminishing employment opportunities, exclusion/restriction of certain social services, and unfavorable stereotypes. Further, WHO claims that ageism is the most “socially normalized” and least resisted form of prejudice (“Ageism”). Representation definitely perpetuates ageism. For the most part, the people in the ads I studied look young -- the same glorified young image we are shown again and again in the media (image 18 and 19). There is a subliminal value judgment: young is beautiful, young is valuable. The women especially look young with one notable exception (image 20).



Image 18

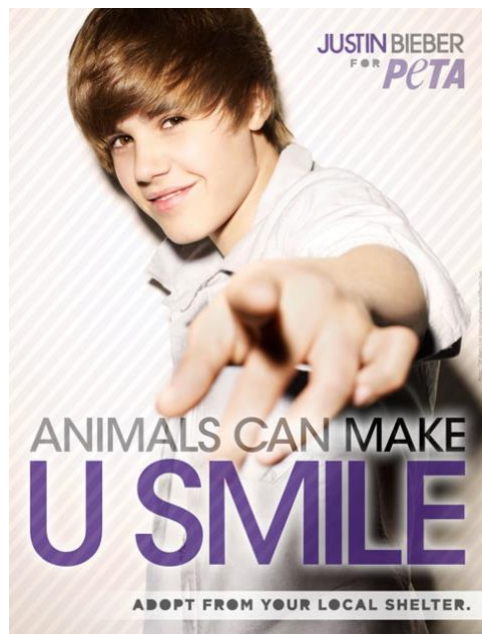


Image 19



Image 20

V. Agency

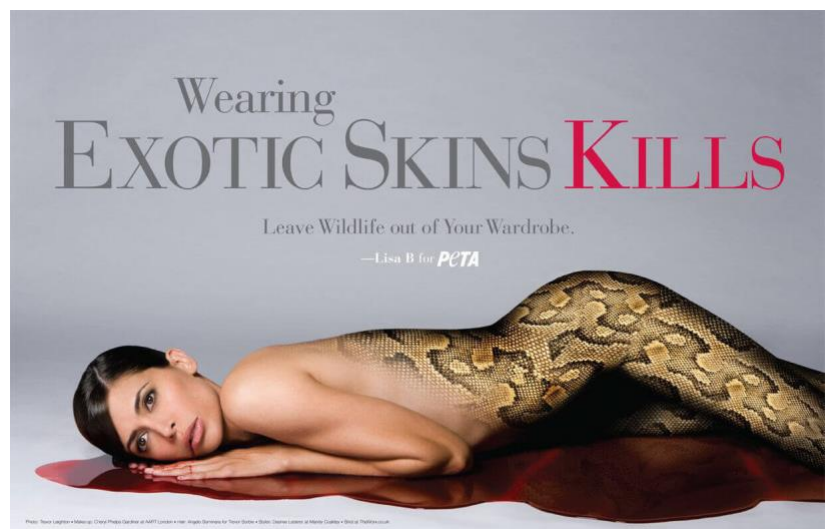
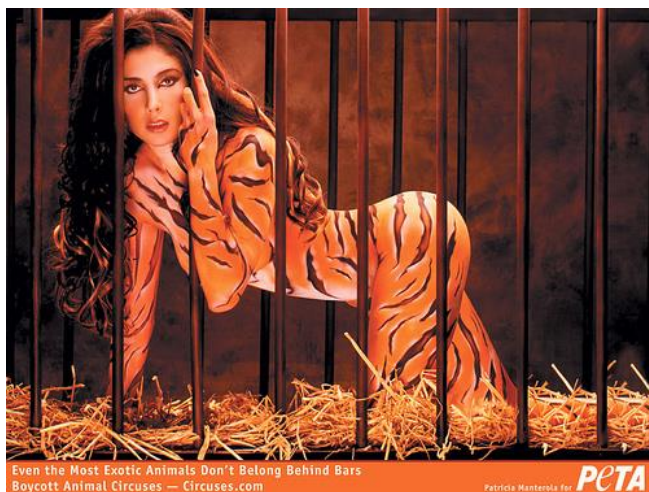
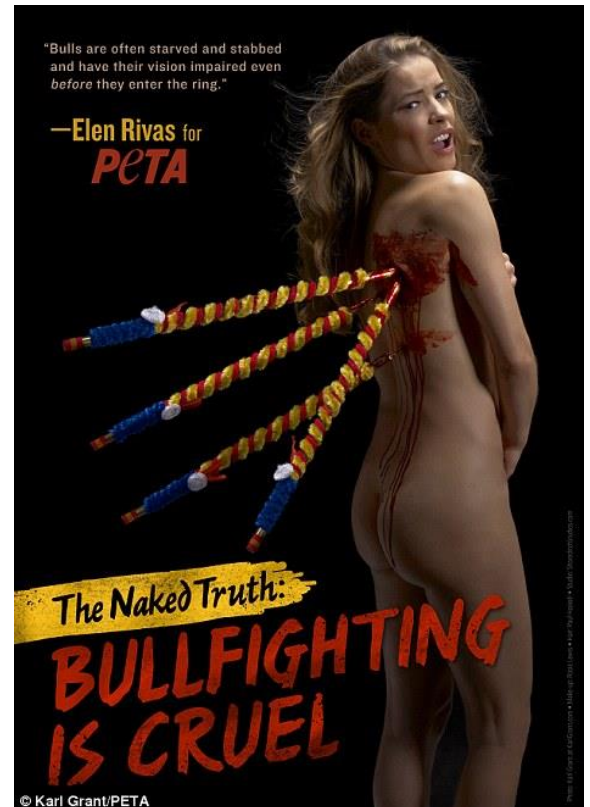
Many of the female bodies are half-animal, in a cage, or brutalized. The idea, of course, is to compare animals to beautiful women -- *you wouldn't want that to happen to a pretty girl, so why should it happen to [insert animal]?* Interestingly, none of the 56 male bodies in my study are half animal (compare to 9 women are half animal or wear tight animal-print body suits). Only one man is brutalized and bloody (compare to 10 women are brutalized/bloody). Seven women wear chains or are in a cage. Only 3 men wear chains or are in a cage, and they do so in a way that still somehow gives them agency. In fact, you get the distinct impression that the man just might break free. The women, on the other hand, do not appear to be putting up a fight.

Even when brutalized or in chains, these men and women exhibit their prescribed gender roles. The women ooze helpless sexuality. Mulvey (1999) coined the term *male gaze* in her studies of cinema, and the concept applies here as well. Mulvey says:

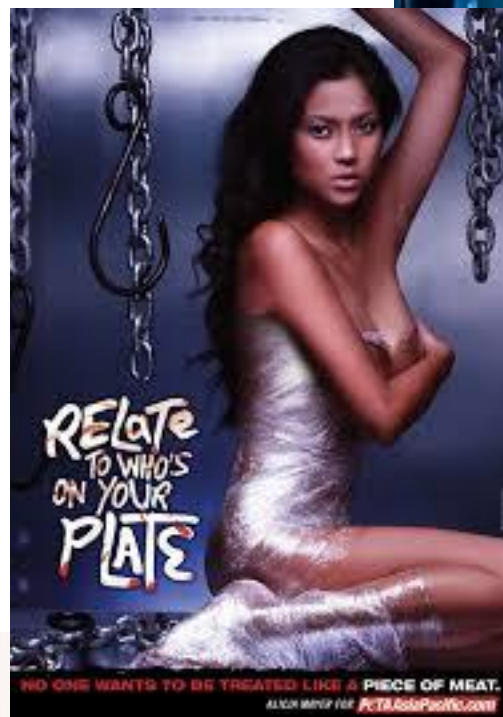
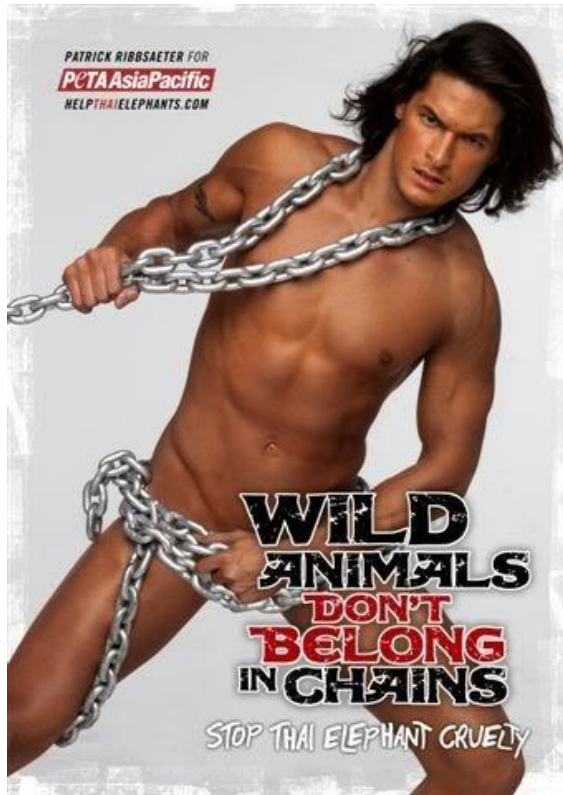
In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (n.p.).

The men in these ads, on the other hand, are more *active*. One appears to be whipping his chains around and the other is protesting his captivity defiantly. The women, however, have accepted their fate and remain still, passive, and a vulnerable kind of pretty. (See Collage A).

Collage A



Collage A
(continued)



VI. A Surprise

In the midst of all these mainstream stereotypes, I found one ad featuring two men in a bed together. The portrayal of a blatantly gay couple is still rare. Of course, all the other couples were heterosexual, but the presence of this one homosexual (and interracial) couple is refreshing (image 21).



Image 21

Discussion

So while PETA is certainly telling us important messages about animal rights, it is also saying a lot about *humans*. What should human men and women look like to be considered valuable? How should human men and women *act* to be valuable? And what we find, sadly, is a perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, unrealistic and unhealthy beauty ideals, racism, and an overall theme of patriarchy.

Much of the scholarly work done so far on PETA ads involves a discussion about sexism and the oppression of women.

Glasser (2011) thinks that sexism and speciesism go hand in hand. She argues that, since we accept that positioning women as animals is degrading to women, we engage in

both sexism and speciesism. She posits that “1) [PETA Ads] are sexist, 2) the way in which they are sexist relies on paralleling women to nonhuman animals, and 3) this parallel reasserts speciesist ideology and reinforces both anti-woman and anti-animal sentiments” (p. 52). She also points out that the women in these ads are positioned in ways to show inferior status, crawling and looking up like a dog might look at its “owner” (p. 61). Glasser calls PETA out: “Accepting these PETA advertisements means accepting the idea that women are objects of consumption and desire even though this is exactly how PETA wants us to stop treating animals” (p. 62).

PETA responds to Glasser’s article, saying, “Our demonstrators and models -- both women and men -- choose to participate in our ads and demonstrations because they want to do something to make people stop and pay attention. Our campaigns aren’t driven by a patriarchal power structure; they are designed to shake people up, initiate discussion, and question the status quo” (p. 63). But then we have to wonder -- do PETA’s intentions really matter here? People will receive these problematic messages about bodies, women and men, and power regardless of PETA’s good intentions.

On the other hand, some scholars like Deckha (2008) argue that, while PETA ads can often be objectionable to feminist sensibilities, sometimes they can be read as “subversive of an anthropocentric and male-dominated order alike” (p. 35). Just because there is female sexuality depicted does not mean the ads are inherently sexist. Deckha argues that anti-fur campaigns are cognizant of the struggles women face on a day-to-day basis. They satirize the requirement for



Image 22

women to be hairless (image 22). Also, one particular ad commands, “Hands off the buns!” while depicting bunnies and a naked woman. This ad might very well be a call for men to stop touching women without permission. Perhaps this is a feminist sentiment after all?

The overall issue this study brings up is summed up well by Deckha: “These campaigns and their responses highlight the ethical question of how a group which advances a social justice agenda, and thus presumably self-identifies as progressive, may interact with -- whether by disregarding, not addressing, harnessing, or exploiting -- other social-justice causes” (p. 37). This is an excellent question indeed, and tremendous disagreement abounds.

This brings us to the Linked Oppressions Thesis. Wyckoff (2014) defends the Linked Oppressions Thesis, arguing, “the liberation of women and of animals might, in practice, depend on addressing women's oppression and animals' oppression as a bundled political problem rather than as independent, discrete forms of oppression” (n.p.). In the rational/irrational dichotomy our society insists on perpetuating, women are assigned the role of irrational and are often associated with nature, the body, and therefore other animals (while men are associated with rationality and the mind). But just because women aren't *exactly* like men does not mean women are lesser, and just because animals aren't *exactly* like humans does not mean animals are lesser. Another example of the similarity between the oppression of women and animals is that both are/have been viewed as property belonging to men. The root cause of the oppression is the same.

There is not much scholarship about the objectification of men in PETA ads, but it is important to note. More and more men are experiencing body policing and unrealistic standards. Hesse-Biber (2007) notes that historically a man's power and wealth were

enough to attract women. Not so anymore. “Today women can be CEOs of top companies and high-ranking military officers, so men may feel that, more than ever, muscles define manhood” (p. 197). Male body dissatisfaction is on the rise, and more men are engaging in disordered eating practices and are seeking plastic surgery (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

Though the objectification of women in PETA ads is probably the most obvious problem, more attention should be paid to male bodies as well as intersectionality. Nothing exists in a vacuum and we would do well to critically look at race/ethnicity, gender identities, body size, age, etc. in *addition* to the plight of objectified women.

So what does this tell us about human-animal relationships? Oppression is a commonality. Whether intentional or not, PETA’s ads demonstrate that being a human does not exclude a person from oppression, discrimination, and abuse. While humans are generally valued more than animals, not all humans are valued equally. Men are valued, women are valued only for certain aspects like their sexuality, whiteness is valued, youth is valued, and only certain body types are valued.

We could even take it a step further and say that, in some cases, PETA prioritizes animal rights *over* certain human rights issues by employing stereotypes and subliminal ideology that harms and polarizes humans. It seems unwise and unnecessary to elevate one noble cause at the expense of others -- especially when there’s a very good chance that the causes are all related.

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