

# **What Are We Really Selling:**

The Ethics of Cosmetic Advertising

Kelley Elzinga

Ethics and Visual Representation

## **Abstract**

There is no denying that in today's market sex sells. It's why we are constantly bombarded with images of overly sexualized men, or more often women, when companies are trying to make a sale. Is it okay to prey on the minds of the young women who we know are so vulnerable to these kinds of ads? Years of psychological research have shown just how big of an impact images can have on the subconscious yet we haven't done much to curb the overly stylized and unattainable ideals these kinds of ads throw at consumers. It's especially problematic that studies have also shown that while yes, sex does sell it isn't the most effective way of selling something, especially when it's in the form of a printed ad. This paper explores the ethics of why we should be demanding more from our corporations. The psychological impact the images they consistently use are damaging to generations of women.

## **Introduction**

While those in marketing and advertising may claim they are interested in more altruistic goals, in reality their primary goal is to influence the purchasing behavior of consumers. Advertisers understand that the perception others have of us will motivate us to purchase something that is likely to turn heads. That something may be a thing, concept, religion, or brand image. We are constantly being force-fed products and ideas through various marketing techniques. This isn't a new trend. Advertising has been around for as long as there has been something to sell. The form of advertising, however, changes with the times. The fact that advertisements affect us in such deep ways isn't groundbreaking. Psychologists and sociologists have been studying the effects of advertising for years and those studies have shown how much we are affected on

numerous levels – some we aren't even aware of. This is what advertising and marketing teams are counting on. They want to use the most current form of product placement or selling technique to push their influence on the public; if we aren't purchasing what they are selling, we are purchasing from their competitor who presented a stronger psychological motivation.

The most popular psychological motivator in advertising is the use of sex. It is well known that “sex sells.” This way of thinking can be seen throughout all forms of marketing. Sex is used to sell everything from cars to people to apartments (think of the term “bachelor pad”). This is especially true in the fashion and cosmetics industries where advertising executives are attempting to build an emotional attachment to their product using sex. While marketing professionals in the fashion industry have no explicit need to be as overly sexualized as they are, it could be argued that they are showing how the clothes would conform to various body types, in a variety of poses. The cosmetics world does not have this excuse. There is no need for the amount of provocative cosmetics campaigns. For example, it is unnecessary to market a product that is used almost exclusively on the face using provocative full body ads. It's even more unnecessary when you realize these campaigns almost run as if they are directed at men, when in reality straight women are the major consumers of their products.

Research has shown (and been replicated) that our unconscious mind remembers images even after our conscious memory has forgotten them<sup>1</sup>. This is the potential danger of advertisements. We are being influenced without our direct consent. This doesn't mean the advertising industry should be shut down completely, because that simply isn't possible. However, it does bring up the idea that it's a field that should be held to a higher standard than it's currently being held. If we can't consent to having our minds

unconsciously affected, there should at least be more regulations or restrictions in how we allow advertising to be conducted. The sexualized way we are selling things may not be the most ethical or even practical way to sell things.

Sexualized images can be a lot to take in. The brain requires energy in order to function. This doesn't mean it will stop working if a person feels tired, although we can feel the effects of a long day or tough question. It has been shown that we can focus on more than one thing at once. In fact, the brain almost acts as though it has many voices, sometimes saying conflicting things<sup>2</sup>. These different voices tire the brain out and it takes even more energy to focus down on one thing. If we use too much energy focusing on one thing, we may not notice what else is present in an image or fail to make the connection we are supposed to make<sup>3</sup>. This could present a big problem for extreme advertising. If too much is going on in an advertisement, the brain won't realize what the real focus is: the product. The neurons are firing over the sexualized man or woman, not the actual beauty product, like mascara. We aren't working to remember the correct part of the ad.

## **Brand Background**

Benefit Cosmetics runs the majority of these overly sexualized cosmetics campaigns. Benefit was founded and owned by females, yet they don't seem to grasp to whom they are selling their products. Much of their advertising methods use visuals typically directed at straight men. It's a strange technique to use when the consumers buying these goods are mostly straight women. Benefit is a company with a history of successful women who set out to empower one another. This isn't clearly shown in the way they present themselves.

Sisters Jean and Jane Ford founded Benefit Cosmetics in 1976. At the time, the company was just a small boutique in San Francisco called Face Place<sup>4</sup>. Jean and Jane then

built the brand themselves and are still heavily involved in product development today. Their daughters have joined the family business. Benefit grew from one iconic product, rose tint (today called Benetint). Rose tint was developed when an exotic dancer walked into Face Place to purchase a nipple tint<sup>5</sup>. She was having trouble getting it and the sisters not only made the product for her when others didn't want to be associated with the world of exotic dancing, but they built their company around it, expanding to the various products offered by this brand.

The goal of cosmetic companies, apart from financial success, has always appeared to empower women. Benefit claims to be no different. Their catchphrase is "laughter is the best medicine<sup>6</sup>." Their aesthetics are typically pink and frilly, and often push a vintage look in their packaging. Their ads are a mix of vintage and sexy, something that almost makes them appear more innocent than they are. They call their clients "Benebabes", yet they don't really define what that entails. Are we to understand it's the woman who is always laughing, because laughter is the best medicine? Or is she just happy, another overly cute sound bite taken from Benefit's website, "happy girls are the prettiest girls<sup>7</sup>." It would be nice to follow what they say; unfortunately these sayings are not as present as the women they portray in the advertisements that accompany them. The thin, buxomy, white woman is the only example of the "Benebabe" we see officially associated with the brand.

For a brand that was once a progressive trendsetter, they seem to have fallen into the trap of narrow minded and one way advertising. The trend of advertising has been sex. Just like most brands, Benefit is taking what looks like the easy way in selling a product. They aren't branching out into the editorial style many other cosmetics brands have had success with. They aren't taking into consideration who they are selling to or what effects the ads they publish are having on their clients. For a brand that promotes "happy girls are

the prettiest girls<sup>8</sup>,” their advertising methods and marketing brand promote body image issues. A consumer’s attitude and purchasing preferences are formed based on these stereotypical messages about what beauty means, prompting the question, “is this ethical selling?”

## **Ad Analysis**

When a product is being sold to consumers, it helps if the consumer knows what they are being sold. Even with the overly sexualized style of ads it’s still usually pretty clear what they are selling. Car commercials may feature a scantily clothed woman but they also clearly feature a car. The same goes for alcohol and even some fast food companies. Things get a little fuzzier when it comes to fashion ads but even with their overly sexualized nature they generally focus on some kind of clothing. Benefit fails to clearly show what their product is. It’s mentioned and maybe shown off to the side but their real focus is the pinup stylized woman.

The marketing for the Boi-ing concealer is one of Benefits more successful ads. The product and word concealer are relatively center stage making it easier to understand what is actually being sold. Take away the image of the product and the word concealer though, and you’re left with an overly made up woman dressed as a boxer. There isn’t even a close up of her face, which is where you would use concealer. The eye is drawn to her legs, then her bare stomach, and finally the expression on her face. It’s not the makeup but the look she’s giving that finally brings the eye to her face. The tagline reads, “witness the ultimate victory over flaws!” It’s too bad Benefit doesn’t show the results of the flaw defying concealer.

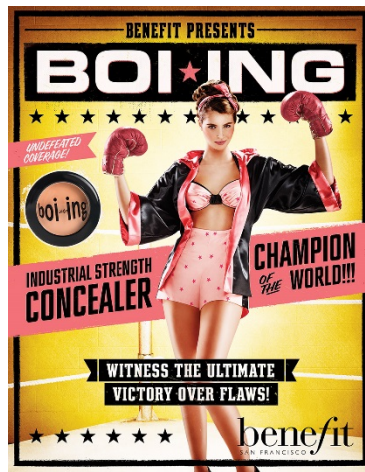


Figure 1: Benefit Cosmetics Boi-ing Concealer ad 2012

Benefit's Puff-Off Eye Cream is featured relatively prominently in its advertisements. Of course, for them "prominently" is the bottom right of the ad, not even attempting to be the focus. The focus of the ad is a done up woman and a dressed down man in a Laundromat as she irons. Like most of Benefit's ads, it has a very modern retro feel. At least the woman is telling the man to "puff-off" when he asks her to "press this, baby" in reference to a shirt he's holding. The woman isn't even looking at the audience; she is turned to the side and looking at her laundry buddy. This is supposed to be selling eye cream. The eyes are not the focus here, especially not with the miles of leg she is showing.



Figure 2: Benefit Cosmetics Puff-Off ad 2014

Benefit seems to take more pride in showing the clever tag lines than they do in actually selling their product. Majorette Blush Primer is an excellent example of this. The ad shows a girl dressed as a majorette in what looks like a gym locker room, implying she is peaking at the guy in the shower (a guy we can't see too much of due to some strategically placed steam). The product is again placed on the lower right corner, clearly not the focus. The tagline here reads, "sneak a peek at those cheeks!" It's a clever line about a blush that the consumer will eventually notice, but there is so much to distract them before they make it to that corner.



Figure 3: Benefit Cosmetics Majorette ad 2014

One of Benefit's more confusing ads is for their skincare line. It's one of their few ads that focus on the face of the woman in the ad. It gets confusing though when they cover the top half of her head with a lampshade. Again, it seems the focus is more on their tagline, "ready, set, glow" than the actual product, which actually isn't even featured in the ad. They are selling skincare products, should we not be able to see benefits of this skincare, the glowing skin? It makes no sense to cut her off in this way. The only clue to the product is the word skincare in relatively small print.





Figure 4. Benefit Cosmetics Radiance Skincare ad 2011

While Benefit doesn't seem to like to show off their actual product, they do seem to be fans of their models' legs. Showing off models' legs is one of the biggest consistencies in their ads. The rest of the body can be clothed but they keep those legs out there. The marketing for their makeup sets is no different. They play up the sexy teacher featuring a woman sitting on a desk in a pencil skirt and heels, her legs and body much more the focus than her face, which showcases her makeup and is actually angled down. Benefit switches it up with this ad and places the products in the left corner; they never even really state what it is they are selling. It isn't overtly clear the product is a makeup set. If anything, it seems as though they are advertising a beauty class.



Figure 5 Benefit Cosmetics Sets ad 2012

There is one Benefit ad that really shows all that is wrong with their marketing. It features a girl lying on a checkered picnic blanket in a dress that matches the blanket (in Benefit's defense, this is the most covered one of their models has been). The woman is decked out in black cherries and has a large cupcake sitting on the picnic basket next to her. There is no tagline, no product anywhere in the ad. What is this ad selling us? If the picture is magnified, something the consumer will not be able to do when presented with the ad, her most obvious cosmetic distinction is her eyeliner. We are left to play the detective here. That is if we still care enough about the product after being distracted by the girl and her suggestive cherries.



Figure 6. Benefit Cosmetics ad unknown date

Benefit's most known product line is a collection of mascara, mascara primer, and eyeliners from a collection called *They're Real*. The line always features the same model and she is sporting obviously enhanced breasts. "They're real, honest" is a classic Benefit move, focusing on promoting their clever tagline over the actual product. *They're Real* is mascara that is supposed to be so volumizing your lashes could be confused for falsies, but "they're real, honest." The mascara is off to the top left corner so as not to distract from the bust of the model, which is really all anyone is noticing.

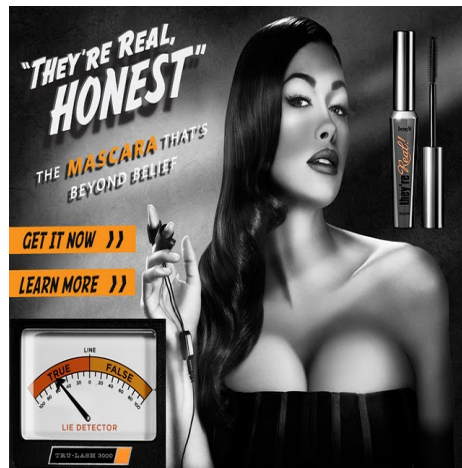


Figure 7 Benefit Cosmetics They're Real Mascara ad 2015

The *They're Real* eyeliner ads are just as bad as the mascara ones, yet somehow more confusing. They feature the *They're Real* model on a bed in lingerie that emphasizes her “real” breasts and she is haphazardly covering herself because on the left side of the ad a man is holding a magnifying glass that is magnifying a shark in the middle of the ad. This is somehow selling us eyeliner and mascara.



Figure 8 Benefit Cosmetics They're Real Liner ad 2015

The newest product in the *They're Real* line is the *They're Real* mascara primer. The marketing for this is 1950s throwback and features the *They're Real* model and a new model doing what they can to snare a man. One is reading a book on how to tie the knot; the other has physically tied up a man. This is in direct contrast to previous *They're Real* ads. Previous ads imply all you need is this product to be that dangerous woman all men

want. Now it's being suggested women need to capture a man, it's such a outdated message from a once progressive company.

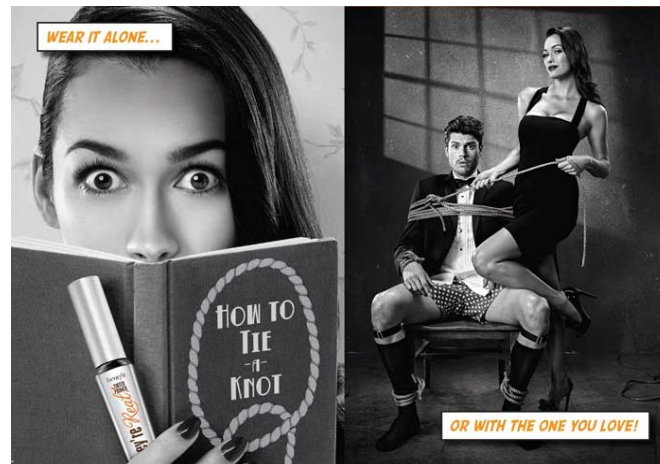


Figure 9 Benefit Cosmetics They're Real Mascara Primer ad 2016

Makeup artist Misael Dejesus is benefit's target audience, an expert consumer. He is a licensed cosmetologist who not only does freelance work but also is employed at one of the leading beauty companies, and one of Benefit's biggest retailers, Sephora. He is a senior artist and beauty class facilitator, he is the person Benefit wants talking up their products. This talking up is something they may need because in Dejesus' experience Benefit is missing out on key audiences with their advertising. "Their ads are too kitschy, they are really alienating a huge age group with them. This means they need to have excellent formula's and word of mouth to even reach those clients<sup>9</sup>."

## Psychological Affects

The problem with Benefit's marketing isn't just that it fails to successfully advertise their product, but they are also perpetuating stereotypes that have no business being perpetuated in 2016. With the amount of research done on the brain and how what we see affects us, brands should be held to higher standards, especially brands that claim to empower women.

It is typical in advertising to not show the full female body, to cut it off in odd ways, something that shows the unimportance of the female form. Cosmetic advertising is one of the only fields where it makes perfect sense not to show the full body. You're selling products that go on the face; the face is where the focus should be. Only one of Benefit's ads places emphasis on the face and in that instance the face is half covered (see figure 4). While this lack of emphasis on the face just poorly shows off the product, it also gives Benefit the opportunity to emphasize their "Benebabe," a woman most of their clients will never be able to emulate, "You would need to be a skilled makeup artist to recreate the looks in these ads. Benefit doesn't even really sell products that make this easy to achieve, you'd have to get creative<sup>10</sup>."

There is a direct link between images and thinking<sup>11</sup>. We have known for years that images overtly affect our subconscious even when we are unaware. C.W. Perky conducted an experiment where she projected an image of a banana at subjects then asked them to draw a banana. Not a single subject claimed to see anything projected in front of them but they all drew the projected banana<sup>12</sup>. We are so greatly influenced by what we see that when an ad continually shows the same kind of woman as what our beauty goals should be, we are forced to retain it and it will infiltrate our ideals of beauty without our direct consent.

The biggest and most obvious psychological effect of this kind of advertising is the effect it has on our subconscious. Benefit always features the same kind of woman in their ads. She is thin, flawless, and white. This "Benebabe" is everything studies have shown is wrong with popular culture. It tells Benefit's clients this is how this product will make you look, and why wouldn't they want to look this way? For years, the media and advertising

have told women they need to be thin and photo shopped<sup>13</sup>. Again, it begs the question, “Is this a message that promotes women’s beauty and social responsibility?”

These images stay in the unconscious even after the ad has left our thoughts. If exposed to enough of them, they can really influence the way a person thinks<sup>14</sup>. In the case of body imaging, this has never been a positive change or influence in thinking. Benefit is just reinforcing an outdated idea of beauty. For a company that was once very progressive with their products and who they catered to they can’t seem to break away from following the trends of today’s advertising. This just introduces a new generation of girls to body issues and continues the issues their adult clients have been fighting against. It’s a fight the age group they are mostly marketing to has dealt with for years. Their current demographic grew up in the age of the anorexic glorification. Most women develop eating disorders in their late teens to early 20s<sup>15</sup>. This is the exact group Benefit is trying to reach with their ads. They are doing more to sell psychological distress than they are mascara.

Not only does this kind of advertisement create body image issues, but it sells more sex than it does makeup. Not a single Benefit ad features the product as its centerpiece. They don’t even show the results of the product, how the eyeliner or blush looks, center stage. The importance is on the model and in most cases it’s her legs that are the center focus. This overly sexualized mode of marketing is not only overdone and unoriginal, but it’s not even the most efficient way to advertise<sup>16</sup>.

If sex appeal is a necessity for a company, which at this point seems to be the case, there are ways to still show off the product while keeping the air of sex and beauty. Take the brand Anastasia Beverly Hills, they feature overly made up beautiful women but the focus is always on the face. None of their ads show lower than the shoulders and even that isn’t common. Dejesus points out that they are able to use attractive models without

ostracizing older clients, they utilize their space and keep things clean cut, it makes someone much more willing to reach for the product<sup>17</sup>. The company understands that makeup predominantly goes on the face and they make that the focus. Not only is the face the focus but the product is almost overly used in the ad. Take the ad for their *Glow Kit*, the model is wearing enough highlight to be seen from space. Someone with only minimal makeup knowledge will know what is being sold to them. On the off chance they don't the kit's themselves take up just as much space as the model in the ad.

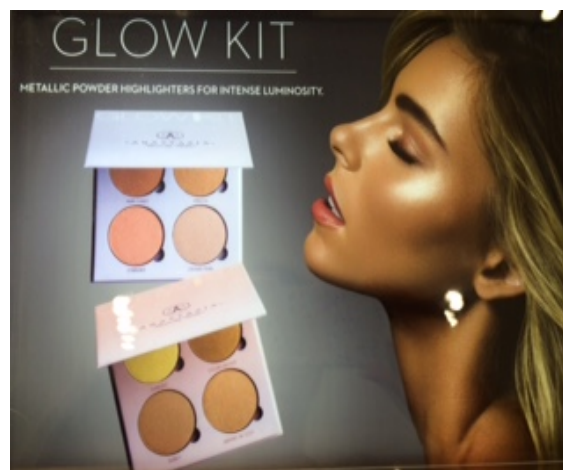


Figure 10 Anastasia Beverly Hills Glow Kit Ad 2016

The brain runs off of energy and if this energy is used up firing neurons to the “sex centers” of the brain, then there is less energy for the brain to focus on the peripheral areas, like the products actually being advertised<sup>18</sup>. This is a big problem for Benefit in particular, because they mainly keep the products on the peripheral. Sexy ads are the most effective when it can be a flash of sexy; 30 milliseconds have been shown to be the most effective<sup>19</sup>. This flashing creates positive feelings towards the products. This of course can only work on video advertising, something Benefit does not utilize, and as such they end up oversexualizing their products without any of the benefits.

## Conclusion

While our unconscious minds are the most unpredictable, it's pretty clear it's the part of the mind advertisers are trying to reach. Our unconscious feels the most desire, and is the part of us that calls for that instant gratification<sup>20</sup>. This is definitely not the best way to advertise but there is no denying that while it promotes all the wrong ideas, it does work. There are other more effective ways to sell a product without not being psychologically degrading and resorting to sex to influence consumers' purchasing power.

The "benefesto", or mission statement of Benefit Cosmetics is as follows: "We believe in whistling while you work it...and faking it 'til you make it. We believe in fast and fabulous beauty solutions...and that glamour is grabbing life by the giggles and not letting go. We believe if at first you don't succeed, apply more lipstick...that sexy gets you everywhere...and if you can't be good, be gorgeous. We believe...laughter is the best cosmetic<sup>21</sup>." While they probably do believe this fully, the company fails to promote it to their clients. They have fallen into the trap of easy advertising. There is a reason the phrase "sex sells" is so popular and that's because it's true. But shouldn't we hold companies to a higher standard? We should constantly be striving for improvement and advancement. Artist Misael Dejesus said it well when he said "Good makeup is not about having eyeliner to your hair, a cut crease, glitter or a super bold lip. It's about making something look beautiful and that can be a simplistic beauty<sup>22</sup>." An ad that lets that kind of beauty come through would be an honest one that would be a refreshing change. That kind of advertisement would be based on ethical standards that this consumer could respect and admire, and would be worth purchasing.



## End Notes

- 1 Bruce E Goldstien, *Cognitive Psychology: Connecting Mind, Research, and Everyday Experience* (California: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2008), 270.
- 2 David C Funder, *The Personality Puzzle*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 372.
- 3 Adrian Furnham, "Does Sex Sell?," *Psychology Today* (blog), December 13, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sideways-view/201312/does-sex-sell>
- 4 "About Us," *Benefit Cosmetics*, Accessed March 7, 2016, <https://www.benefitcosmetics.com/us/en/about-us>
- 5 About Us, *Benefit Cosmetics*
- 6 About Us, *Benefit Cosmetics*
- 7 About Us, *Benefit Cosmetics*
- 8 About Us, *Benefit Cosmetics*
- 9 Misael Dejesus (senior makeup artist, Sephora) in discussion with the author, March 2016.
- 10 Dejesus, discussion, March 2016
- 11 Goldstien, *Cognitive Psychology*, 277.
- 12 Goldstien, *Cognitive Psychology*, 277-278.
- 13 Laurie Essig, "Love or Hate Yourself, Advertising May Be to Blame" *Psychology Today* (blog), April 22, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/love-inc/201304/love-or-hate-yourself-advertising-may-be-blame>
- 14 Goldstien, *Cognitive Psychology*, 284.
- 15 David Barlow and V. Mark Durand, *Abnormal Psychology* (California: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2009), 261.
- 16 Adrian Furnham, "Does Sex Sell?," *Psychology Today* (blog), December 13, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sideways-view/201312/does-sex-sell>
- 17 Dejesus, discussion, March 2016.
- 18 Matt Huston, "Flickers of Desire," *Psychology Today* (blog), February 20, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/matt-huston>
- 19 Huston, "Flickers of Desire," February 20, 2014
- 20 David C Funder, *The Personality Puzzle*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 395.
- 21 "About Us," *Benefit Cosmetics*
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# What Are We Really Selling?

Kelley Elzinga

- Sex sells but should we let it?



# Is It Effective?

- Sexy advertising isn't as effective as companies would like it to be
- It is especially ineffective when used in print format, we need a flash of sexy to really pair the product with positivity
- Surveyed studies show people have more negative feelings towards the sexualized ads as opposed to clean ads
- The brain focuses on the sex in the ads rather than the product in the peripheral

# Images and the Brain

- The Perky Experiment
- Optimum Arousal Theory
- The brain processes multiple things at once, we don't get to decide what which things influence it

benefit  
SAN FRANCISCO



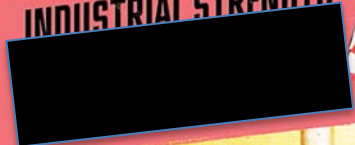


BENEFIT PRESENTS

BOI★ING



INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH



CHAMPION  
OF THE  
WORLD!!!

WITNESS THE ULTIMATE  
VICTORY OVER FLAWS!



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SAN FRANCISCO

BENEFIT PRESENTS

# BOI★ING

UNDEFEATED  
COVERAGE!



INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH  
**CONCEALER**

**CHAMPION  
OF THE  
WORLD!!!**

WITNESS THE ULTIMATE  
VICTORY OVER FLAWS!



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SAN FRANCISCO

WE'RE  
KICKING  
SOME  
CLASS!

TIPS  
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WE'RE  
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SAN FRANCISCO

**"THEY'RE REAL,  
HONEST"**

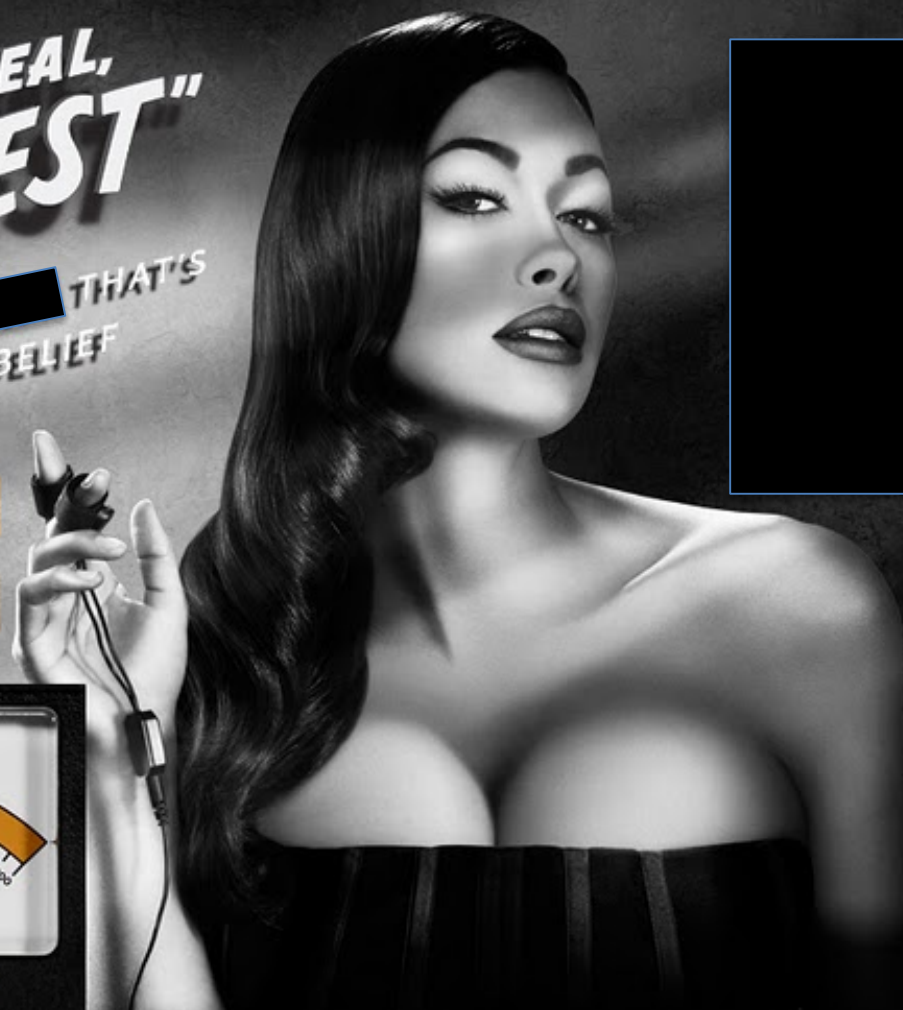
THE [REDACTED] THAT'S  
BEYOND BELIEF

**GET IT NOW >>**

**LEARN MORE >>**



**TRU-LASH 3000**





"THEY'RE REAL,  
**HONEST**"

THE **MASCARA** THAT'S  
BEYOND BELIEF

GET IT NOW >>

LEARN MORE >>



TRU-LASH 3000





- Benefit rarely makes the face the focus of their ads, preferring the female body to be the focus point.



- The “Benebabe” is always the same kind of girl.
- Having a one type of image shown to you will eventually effect the subconscious.





- The Objectification Theory: We determine our self worth based on outside factors and the perception of others.
- This leads to to see yourself as something that needs to be evaluated and commodified.



# GLOW KIT

METALLIC POWDER HIGHLIGHTERS FOR INTENSE LUMINOSITY.



- While sex isn't necessarily the most effective way to sell a product it does work, does this make it okay?
- If years of research have shown how negative these kinds of ads can be should we hold corporations to higher standards?
- Is it possible to sell positivity and empowerment through a print ad?



# Resources

- “About Us.” *Benefit Cosmetics*. Accessed March 7, 2016.  
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