Student

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Seeing a Women

In a capitalistic society where advertisement rules, we can look at the change in the type of pictures used for advertisement to measure social change. Claire Cain Miller’s “From Sex Object to Gritty Woman: The Evolution of Women in Stock Photos” from *The New York Times*, looks at the progression of these photos in regard to women for the last 10 years. The general idea is pretty obvious in the title; 10 years ago, women were simply considered sex objects too men. Nice. Good thing that’s changed, right? According to Miller’s stock photos, it *has* changed, and women are now seen as “powerful” people. Except, looking around even today, that’s pretty obviously still not the case. But first, just take a second to realize it took 10 years for half of the population to even *begin* to realize the other half were living, breathing, thinking people too, and not just objects created to satisfy them. Frustrated yet?

Let’s go back to 2007 where the most popular stock photo for the search term “women” was a naked woman lying in bed barely covered with a towel. Obviously, turning women into sex objects is not the main agenda of a company advertising a product, however, it is a side effect that many companies don’t seem too torn up about. The main agenda of a company is to sell, and convince consumers to buy things that they don’t really need- or necessarily even want. The fact is that sex sells, but at the expense of half the population being degraded into objects. The only remedy being that people don’t buy from companies that use degrading methods, so in other words just don’t buy consumer products. Ever. Simple, right?

The good news is, as ridiculously long as it has taken, there has been some measure of social change (despite the many other factors effecting popularity) as seen in the stock photos. From 2007 until 2017, Miller shows a pretty obvious progression of the type of stock photo defining women. 2010 being the last year that the most popular photo included a naked woman. There might still be raging social issues, impossible body standards, and degrading cultural beliefs, but at least after 3 years we finally got some clothes on the women in our photos. 2011 through 2016 is an equal mix of impressive physical prowess shown by women and moments in everyday life. A refreshing change of scenery when looking at the photos, but still fairly focused on the physical appearance.

Now we hit 2017. Yay! The year for equality! Except, not really, considering the massive pay wage gap and perpetuating rape culture. 2017’s most popular photo with the search term women was a woman hiking alone in Banff National park, but here is the kicker, you can’t even see her face. Wow! Social change! Finally, a photo in which a “women’s appearance is beside the point” for the first time in 10 years. Although a little unrealistic, as the chances of a women taking the risk and hiking *alone* is low, it’s a step that millions of women have been fighting for. If you can accept all the things that are still wrong and the long road ahead, this step does fill one with a sense of achievement and maybe even hope.

This “astounding” social feat wasn’t completely a result of social change, surprisingly, but was in part driven by the Lean In Collection that was created in 2014 by Getty. By finally providing over 14,000 photos, at least the media and advertisement companies can’t claim a lack of material, or a lack of choices. Unfortunately, however, not even Miller’s optimistic article can ignore some serious short comings. Men in photos shown with babies are bearded and muscled to “emphasize their masculinity” and prove they are in no way feminine being seen with a baby that is half theirs. Dodged a bullet with the beard there didn’t we?

Another factor to this collection and its popularity includes where the pictures are used in the first place. Researchers found that most of these photos are used in lifestyle articles. Articles that wouldn’t really make sense being represented by a half-naked woman lying in a bed, but would be better shown with an active and successful woman; making it seem like if you follow their lifestyle tips, you too can push gender boundaries just as well as the women in the stock photo. Lucky you. An example that Miller describes is that although many of the photos show women in tech or science, they are “seldom used to illustrate general science stories” and rather accompany articles that more relate to the challenges of working in a male-dominated career or something similarly tied specifically to women. We find the same pattern with images of nonwhite women only being used in the specific context of race or ethnicity. Shocking to hear, I’m sure.

As exciting as this accomplishment is, it’s fairly obvious that more needs to be done. It took 10 years for society to simply value photos of women with clothes on, let alone value them as working and important people. There are serious issues shown by Miller here, and “it’s not good enough for companies to just say, ‘Hey, let’s put some diverse models in our projects,’” there needs to be a catalyst for social change. There needs to be conscious awareness and action from everybody, from the everyday people to the CEO’s of major advertisement companies.