Chapter 6: Popular Culture and Media | Exercise 1

SEEING IS NOT ALWAYS BELIEVING

CRITICALLY INTERPRETING WORDS AND IMAGES IN THE MEDIA

Media
Stereotypes
Body image
Gender based violence
Gender
Gender non-conforming
Trans*
Violence
Gender roles
Self-esteem
Gender stereotypes
Sexism
Violence
Objectification
Disability
Sex (biological)
Abuse
Sex (sexual activity)
Gender norms
LGBT

✓ 1. **To recognise how restrictive media can be in the use of images and language.**
✓ 2. **To understand that advertisements and magazines use certain images and language to perpetuate gender stereotypes.**
✓ 3. **To understand how images and language used by media feed into norms and values that influence body image, self-esteem and gender-based violence.**

🕐 1 hour

⭐ Popular magazines **Worksheet: 'Words in the Media'**

PROCEDURE

PRIOR TO CLASS

1 Ask every learner to bring a magazine to class (it can be an old magazine). You should also bring a few magazines just in case anyone forgets or can't find one to bring.

IN CLASS

PART 1 – LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA

2 Tell learners to look through the advertisements in their magazines and to create a list of the words that are associated with women and women's products in these adverts. Ask them to list these words on the 'Words in the Media Worksheet' and to make a tick every time the word appears in the ads. Ask them to make a similar list of the words that are associated with men and men's products. For example, a learner may find that the word 'silky' appears ten times in their magazine in women's adverts, while the word 'safe' appears twice.

3 Ask learners to add up the ticks next to each word and to write the total in the appropriate column next to each word.

4 Once they have completed their lists, ask them to discuss as a class:

a. Which words appear more prominently or frequently for each gender? What is the most often-used word for each gender?

b. What do the words and their frequency in adverts, tell us about how advertisers view each **gender**?

c. Are there different messages aimed at young **women** and young men? If so, what are they? Were there any messages/words that imply **gender non-conformity** (not fitting the categories of man or woman)?

d. How does this shape the way that (young) men and women see themselves and each other? What about gender non-conforming (or **trans***) people?

e. How might these ideas put young people at risk of **violence**?

PART 2 – IMAGES IN THE MEDIA

5 Learners should go through their magazines to select an image of a woman and a man, that they think are typical of how the **media** represents women and men in advertisements. Tear out images.

6 Ask learners to stick their sample pictures onto the board, with all the pictures of **women** grouped together on one side and all the pictures of men on the other.

7 Ask the learners to look at all the images and discuss the following questions:

a. What are the main characteristics of the pictures of women, and the pictures of men? Look at size, height, clothing, race, body stance, facial expression, (dis)ability and environment.

b. What messages about **gender roles** and male and female body types are the images reinforcing?

c. Who is the target audience for these images?

d. Do you feel that you or your friends are represented well in the images? Why or why not?

e. Does the magazine display images of people that are representative of the general public? Are various body shapes, age groups, dis/abilities, races, gender identities and expressions, and cultures represented?

f. Do the images make you feel good about yourself?

8 Write the words **body image** and **self-esteem** on the board and ask learners what each means. Once learners seem to have come to a consensus, write the following definitions on the board, and reflect on how their definition differs, if at all:

BODY IMAGE: How one views and feels about one's body, and how attractive one perceives oneself to be. This is influenced very strongly by the **media**, family and school experiences; it is related to **self-esteem**.

SELF-ESTEEM: How one feels about oneself, one's worth and value. People with high self-esteem tend to be confident and **assertive**. People with low self-esteem tend to lack confidence and find it difficult to express themselves.

9 To facilitate class discussion, ask the following questions of images, **self-esteem** and **gender stereotypes**:

a. Are the images on the board realistic representations of what men and women look like? Are there any representations of gender non-conforming or trans* people?

b. What do you think allows the people in these pictures to look the way they do?

Guide learners to consider things like:

- Photoshop and digital enhancement of the images
- Lighting and makeup
- Professional stylists
- Personal trainers
- Nutritionists and dieticians
- Wealth
- Health

c. What is the impact of these kinds of images on young people's **body image** and **self-esteem**?

d. How is it different for men and for women? What about gender non-conforming people?

e. If this is a product advert, does it make you want to own the product?

10 Wrap up by encouraging learners to be mindful about the images and language that are projected by the **media**, and to recognise that these portray **gender** in a stereotypical and unrealistic way that seldom matches up with what men and **women** look like in reality and completely excludes atypical and gender non-conforming bodies. Their expectations of themselves and their friends should not be focused on the images that they see around them.

TEACHER TIPS

General

Teachers should emphasise that there are many different body types in our society, which are not represented in magazines. It is very important to be aware of language and images in relation to **gender**, as inherent hidden meanings perpetuate stereotypes and expectations. Aside from gender, you can also discuss the representation of race, culture, and age in the media. This will be particularly effective in diverse classrooms.

Making the Link with Gender & Violence

The images of **women** portrayed in magazines often perpetuate an acceptance of **gender-based violence** because of the poses and body positions in which women are placed in advertisements. For example, women may be shown as being subservient, and are often shown in ways that are sexualised, or show them to be 'flighty' and consumerist. This is especially true in fashion magazines and is problematic because it sends the message that women can be seen as sexual objects.

Adverts that use digital enhancing try to create images of 'perfect' women, often for purposes of making them appear sexy. The average person is continuously exposed to advertisements. If magazines repeatedly display sexist images, then **sexism**, **objectification,** and **violence** against women become normalised.

Adverts also create unrealistic expectations of beauty for both **sexes**, especially for young **women**. It is important that learners understand the difficulty, if not impossibility, of attaining the beauty ideals that are presented in the media. They should be aware of how these beauty standards impact their own self-esteem, and how they can impact relationships and social attitudes.

Learners should reflect on how the media may portray **women** as powerless in society. They should understand how by constantly seeing, hearing and internalising that women are sex objects, meant to be attractive, have value only if they are pretty, have value to men only when they are young, have value only as mothers in the home might impact on young women's self-image. Make the comparison between this process and the way that women in **abusive** relationships internalise the views and ideas of the abuser, that they are worthless, ugly, and only useful for **sex**.

In addition the complete absence of images of people who's bodies, identities, and (dis)abilites do not fit the norm makes these groups invisible in society. As a result, they are more difficult to identify with and ultimately more susceptible to violence. It is only through visibility in the media and in society at large that people of all kinds can be understood and accepted.

Assessment Ideas

This exercise is meant to be discussion-based, but can lend itself to a variety of homework assignments. These might include:

1 For learners who have access to the internet: Ask them to use two different magazines to make word lists (single gender only) based on the advertising in each magazine. They should use two different genres of magazine, for example, YOU magazine and a fashion/sports magazine. Using Wordle (available at www.wordle.net) make a word cloud for each list, and analyse the differences that they see.

2 After seeing how body images are portrayed in the media in current magazines, ask learners to research the portrayal of **body images** and **gender norms** in older advertisements, paying attention also to the words used. Have images become more accurate and representative, or less so? What differences can they see? What does that say about how advertising works today?

3 Ask learners to look through the magazines for pictures of families and couples. Throughout the magazine, how many times does an LGBT couple or family appear? Why is this so, and what does it say about our society? When **LGBT** couples are excluded from **media**, what message does this send? Ask them to write a reflection paper on this topic.

4 Ask learners to look for images that represent gender non-conformity. How often does it appear? What is the impact on trans* youth? Ask them to write a reflection paper on this topic.

WORKSHEET: WORDS IN THE MEDIA

List words, for each gender, that you see most often in advertising. Make a tick every time you see the word somewhere in the advert.

WOMEN			MEN		
WORD	TICK	TOTAL	WORD	TICK	TOTAL