What Could America's Top Models Be Thinking?

Written by mlmoment
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From an audience standpoint, so many fashion advertisements are problematic because they create standards for body shape, size and appearance that can never be attained. What about the models themselves? They represent something generic and standard-ized. Identity, personality--those things which make a person unique--are layered over, airbrushed, and retouched beyond recognition. In this MediaLit Moment, your students will be able to use the power of story to effectively strip away the layers which obscure the real people "behind" the images that they see in magazines.

Credit must also be given to the originators of this activity, "Teen Aware: Sex, Media and You," a project of the Teen Futures Media Network at the University of Washington. Here's a link to the original activity: http://depts.washington.edu/taware/document.cgi?id=53   You can find the Teen Futures Media Network site, "Teen Health and the Media," at: http://depts.washington.edu/thmedia/

Have students write what a model might be thinking during a fashion shoot

AHA!: Magazine ads turn models into fantastic, made-up figures that are supposed to make the product more sexy or glamorous, but they tell me nothing about what the models are like in real life!

Key Question #1: Who created this message?

Core Concept #1: All media messages are constructed

Key Question #5: Why is this message being sent?

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Core Concept #5: Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power

Grade Level: 9-12

Materials: Magazine ads from both men's and women's magazines with photographs of top models posed to sell products based on their looks, style and/or suggestive behavior.

Activity: Begin by asking students to tell you something about the men and women they've seen in magazine advertisements. What do they look and act like? As students start sketching out the gender stereotypes used in these advertisements, note how impossibly sexy, glamorous or macho they are. Discuss one or more of the techniques (costumes, lighting, photo retouching, etc.) used to turn models into highly stylized images that have little to do with reality—all in service of selling the product.

What do they think these men and women might be like in real life?   Ask students to select an ad (or ads) and "re-humanize" the models in them by writing a thought-diary of one or two paragraphs in length which describes the feelings they might have had when the photograph was created. Ask them to write in first person, from the point of view of the model. This internal monologue can be as simple and mundane as, "My feet are killing me!," or it could show the model wondering whether working in their occupation is really fulfilling their needs.   Have students read their thought diary to the class while displaying the original ad.Generate a discussion about the activity. How does imagining what the real person in the ad was thinking and feeling change the way students feel about the image used in the ad? What do they have to say about the difference between the real person and the image that the photographers worked so hard to create?

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