

LTCC students learning the impact of gender bias in ads

By Susan Wood

While politicians declare war on women's issues, the battleground actually started long ago in the media world.

This is what longtime Lake Tahoe Community College sociology Professor Scott Lukas has discovered.

A decade ago, Lukas focused on gender bias in advertising for one of his sociology classes. His students became so widely interested they asked him for the PowerPoint presentation. The topic became so intriguing, Lukas took the 50 images he gathered depicting women in compromising, denigrating positions and installed them with analysis into a website.



The exploitation of women in ads is the subject of a class at LTCC.

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The site has grown to more than 3,000 images. Lukas still calls it "a work in progress" despite having worldwide

readership.

The topic that now features television shows has morphed into its own class – and started this week at LTCC called Gender. (It's under the Sociology Department.)

Lukas, who has made presentations on the project, including one before the LTCC board, went on a sabbatical from teaching last year to complete the project. This enabled him to delve deeply into how simple images may spur sexism, violence, child abuse, homophobia and even torture.

Noting a curious situation, the project's report asks: "Why should we accept the association of a product, such as a stereo system or a table and a sexualized woman?"

So why should we care and why can't we tune out what we don't want to hear or see?

"Everyone is impacted by gender issues because the effects can be tragic," Lukas told *Lake Tahoe News*, further citing the Jerry Sandusky case as an example. The former Penn State assistant football coach was convicted of severe child abuse charges, including rape.

A major concern is in a society where the population picks up a barrage of images that show women and children being abused, objectified or sexualized (even in the mildest form) desensitizing effects take place. One exhibit on the website highlighted a television show called "Toddlers and Tiaras" in which a young girl is dressed up as the prostitute character in the hit movie "Pretty Women". And in an episode of "America's Top Model," models were asked to pose as crime victims.

These images are prevalent in "Big Daddy" ads with professional racecar driver Danica Patrick breaking the mold for women in the workplace resorts to her looks to sell the product.

“In a sense, ads have gone backward,” Lukas said of the pendulum swinging for women’s equality.

“We laugh at it all the time,” South Shore veteran ad man Bruce Rettig said of the times he and his wife watch ads on television.

In the big picture, Rettig called objectifying women as the “Barbie syndrome” in which girls want to obtain the body of a perfect model and that if you look at the demographic the ad is reaching, one might find that “maybe a large segment” looks to the images to tell them who to look up to or aspire to be. Then, there’s the obvious – sex sells.

“It seems that way as a part of human nature. It’s a shame,” Rettig said.

Even a small town like South Lake Tahoe cannot escape stereotypes that perpetuate the images – no matter how innocent they seem. Take the casino ads that show women in tight-fitting outfits wildly dancing and partying. Sure, they look fun. But they represent something larger going on at a societal level.



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“We have nothing to the level of Las Vegas or Los Angeles, but it’s still there,” Lukas said, referring to male-dominated sexism. “Awareness is key. We should be aware we’re under the influence of these ads.”

When Lukas first brought the topic to his classroom, he encountered a mixed reaction from students.

“The men felt more threatened. They learned the material, but they thought of it as propaganda,” he said. Their behavioral theory was: “If you have differences in the sexes, men are perceived as weaker. That’s part of their resistance,” Lukas added.

The professor especially witnessed resistance when the class discussed how former President George W. Bush brought back the “macho president” after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The subject of machismo hit close to home for one of Lukas’ male students, Jose Pena.

The origin of “machismo” comes from Spain, however its influence as an exaggerated display of male dominance over women spans many nations.

The conversation struck a chord with Pena because of his Hispanic background. Although he said he didn’t witness these types of relationships in his family, Pena has seen the behavior in some of his male friends when it comes to how they view their mates.

“This kind of goes hand-in-hand with the aspect of treating women as second-class citizens,” Pena said, citing the lack of equal pay for women and few breaking the glass ceiling. “I guess this would be the American equivalent of machismo.”

Nonetheless, Pena said he's optimistic about what the future brings, but agrees it's "an uphill battle" for society to accept the notion of "all totally equal in this land of opportunity."

Progress may start with one person.

"I am a male that will forever recognize the hardships that females face on a daily basis. Like my mom always said: 'For every bad person out there, let's just hope that there (are) two more good ones to replace the bad one.'"