Advertising, Stereotypes and Health Advice: Understanding Sunbed Consumption in Contemporary Britain, 1978-2016

Introduction. The changing visual culture of sunbeds presents three areas of inquiry. First, how did adverts encourage ‘excessive’ sunbed use during the 1980s; what anti-sunbed prevention methods were organised by both medical and media officials from 1991, and finally, were these public health campaigns effective - how did the public respond?


   Sources: Interviews (Users/The Sunbed Association/Medical experts), Print press, Yellow Pages.

Chapter 1 evaluates the economic, socio-cultural and policy-related factors that led to the sunbed industry’s ‘boom’. A subsection explores the geographic and spatial history - investigating why sunbeds became superabundant in Liverpool compared to other regions.


   Sources: BBC Archives (news reports, documentaries, sitcoms, films). Interviews (Media officials).

In 1991, the first medical authority coined the term ‘Tanorexia’. Sunbeds were ‘addictive’ and a moral panic began in the media. An undesirable ‘Tanorexic’ stereotype was both created and incessantly reinforced in national medias. The ‘irrational, young, working-class and female sunbed addict’ was presented as comically tanned, blonde, narcissistic, self-destructive and vulgar.

3. ‘The Look to Die For?*’: Anti-sunbed Health Advice (1991-2016)

   Sources: **Bin the Sunbeds campaign’ (Liverpool council, St. Moriz, NHS, SunSmart, Cancer Research, 2013), Health Education Authority, Liverpool’s Public Health Annual Reports. Interviews (Campaigners/Sunbed users).

Interviews will evaluate both the decision-making behind the anti-sunbed health campaigns, and how they were received by the public. These campaigns used the professionalisation of advertising – a cultural method of marketing – to explicitly target young women.

Conclusion. Sunbeds were presented first as ‘healthy’; then ‘addictive’ and finally ‘life-threatening’. A ‘Tanorexic’ stereotype was created and reinforced. This extreme and highly biased depiction weakened health advice. Sunbed users are of all sexes, occupations, ages and socio-economic backgrounds. This needs to be acknowledged in future studies and campaigns.

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*Scan the QR code to watch my 3MinuteThesis competition video. Or visit: youtu.be/SMULieP3qw
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