

Why the Whitecaps video offends many people

Did you catch the footage of three young, **blond-haired female fans bouncing up and down in elation at a Whitecaps soccer game**? In light of the controversy it inspired, did you shake your head in consternation and wonder, “What the hang’s wrong with this?”

Whitecaps management was quick to pull the promotional video in response to viewer outrage, but really, what kind of uptight spoilsport would you have to be to object?

Consider this one person’s attempt to make use of the teachable moment by sharing a couple of sources of context — among dozens of potential examples — that might have influenced the way many others saw the video:

Back in 2011, the Whitecaps launched a two-minute teaser campaign to promote their debut season, taking the term “teaser” a little too seriously. The **video featured two minutes of close-up skin shots of a naked female body being painted with Whitecaps colours.**

When the full woman was finally revealed, she made sultry eyes with the camera and caressed a soccer ball as if it were a mink coat. The footage looked more like an X-rated movie trailer than something designed to market family entertainment.

At the time, the Whitecaps’ marketing director defended the campaign and its companion print ad by insisting it wasn’t as revealing as a Victoria’s Secret catalogue, letting us all in on how low the bar was.

Novelist, soccer mom and forest company president Anne Giardini generously offered insight through an open letter. In it, she contrasted the passive fantasy babe image with one of women who actually play the game, “fully dressed in a jersey, shorts and pads ... sweaty, muddy, active, focused, exhilarated and keen to win.”

The Whitecaps marketing folks may have forgotten this lesson, or perhaps they didn't understand it well enough to appreciate that merely toning down the degree to which they used women's bodies to sell their sport wouldn't be sufficient.

(You can imagine their hand-wringing now: "But we used actual fans! Wearing clothes!")

The problem is that years of cultural shorthand have reinforced the blond sex object stereotype they cynically drew on last time, to ensure that this year's bouncing body parts, helpfully highlighted by the slow-motion effect, seemed like slightly less suggestive more-of-the-same.

Of course, it's not the Whitecaps' fault that over many decades, retrograde brewing companies have made "beer ad" synonymous with "tasteless objectification."

Nor is the soccer team to blame for the fact that sports bars festooned with TSN screens all seem to dress their female servers in oversized head bands doubling as skirts, barely up to the task of covering their butts.

The problem is that this constant bombardment of "woman as titillating decoration" has exhausted the patience of lots of women — and many of the men who love and respect us.

We see women as whole human beings with brains and hearts, who should be valued not simply for how we look but for what we do, including bear children and compete in sports. (Speaking of which, we also deeply resent the fundamental unfairness of a system that allocates the vast majority of funding and resources to athletes who happen to boast a Y chromosome.)

Finally, and not insignificantly, we see the link between treating a woman's body like an object in advertising, and looking the other way when one is dragged unconscious out of an elevator. We understand that the NFL's initial willingness to forgive Ray Rice's assault of his fiancée, Janay, was a natural extension of the attitudes — perhaps equally unconscious — underlying sexist marketing.

And we'd like it to stop.

*Shari Graydon is the founder of **Informed Opinions** and the author of the recently reissued **In Your Face: The Culture of Beauty and You**.*