

## **Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising**

Michael F. Jacobsen  
Laurie Anne Mazur

---

**Source:** Jacobson, M. F., & Mazur, L. A. (1995). Sexism and sexuality in advertising. In M. F. Jacobson & L. A. Mazur (Eds.), *Marketing madness: A survival guide for a consumer society*, (pp. 74-87). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

---

Women's bodies have been used whole, or in parts, to market everything from brassieres to monkey wrenches. One effect of such ads is to give women unrealistic notions of what they should look like. After instilling anxiety and insecurity in women, the ads imply that buying consumer products can correct practically any defect, real or imagined. Moreover, the women's magazines that could be telling the truth about such marketplace fraud are largely co-opted by their advertisers. Nor are men immune from exploitation. As more idealized male bodies appear in ads, men may, at last, really understand what upsets women about the way they are depicted in ads. In addition to reinforcing sexist notions about ideal woman and manhood, ads exploit sexuality. Many products are pitched with explicit sexual imagery that borders on pornography. Not only do these ubiquitous images encourage us to think of sex as a commodity, but they often reinforce stereotypes of women as sex objects and may contribute to violence against women.

## **The Iron Maiden**

### **How Advertising Portrays Women**

Fourteen year-old Lisa arranges herself in the mirror--tightening her stomach, sucking in her cheeks, puffing her lips into an approximation of a seductive pout. It's no use, she thinks, as she glances down at the open magazine on her dresser table. I'll never look like the women in the ads. She flips through the pages, studying the beautiful women with their slender hips, flawless skin, and silky hair. Well, maybe if I lost twenty pounds, she thinks, pinching her baby-fat tummy with an acid feeling of despair. Or if I had the right clothes and makeup...

EVERYWHERE WE TURN, ADVERTISEMENTS tell us what it means to be a desirable man or woman. For a man, the message is manifold: he must be powerful, rich, confident, athletic. For a woman, the messages all share a common theme: She must be "beautiful." Advertising, of course, did not invent the notion that women should be valued as ornaments; women have always been measured against cultural ideals of beauty. But advertising has joined forces with sexism to make images of the beauty ideal more pervasive, and more unattainable, than ever before.

In her 1991 book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf compares the contemporary ideal of beauty to the Iron Maiden, a medieval torture device that enclosed its victims in a spike-lined box painted with a woman's image. Like the Iron Maiden, the beauty ideal enforces conformity to a single, rigid shape. And both cause suffering—even death—in their victims.

The current Iron Maiden smiles at us from the pages of *Vogue* magazine. She's a seventeen-year-old professional model, weighing just 120 pounds on a willowy 5'10" frame. Her eyes are a deep violet-blue, her teeth pearly white. She has no wrinkles, blemishes—or even pores, for that matter. As media critic Jean Kilbourne observes in *Still Killing Us Softly*, her groundbreaking film about images of women in advertising, "The ideal cannot be achieved; it is inhuman in its flawlessness. And it is the only standard of beauty—and worth—for women in this culture."

The flawlessness of the Iron Maiden is, in fact, an illusion created by makeup artists, photographers, and photo retouchers. Each image is painstakingly worked over: Teeth and eyeballs are bleached white; blemishes, wrinkles, and stray hairs are airbrushed away. According to Louis Grubb, a leading New York retoucher, "Almost every photograph you see for a national advertiser these days has been worked on by a retoucher to some degree .... Fundamentally, our job is to correct the basic deficiencies in the original photograph or, in effect, to improve upon the appearance of reality."<sup>2</sup> In some cases, a picture is actually an amalgam of body parts of several different models—a mouth from this one, arms from that one, and legs from a third.<sup>3</sup> By inviting women to compare their unimproved reality with the Iron Maiden's airbrushed perfection, advertising erodes self-esteem, then offers to sell it back—for a price.

The price is high. It includes the staggering sums we spend each year to change our appearance: \$33 billion on weight loss;<sup>4</sup> \$7 billion on cosmetics; \$300 million on cosmetic surgery.<sup>5</sup> It includes women's lives and health, which are lost to self-imposed starvation and complications from silicone breast implants. And it includes the impossible-to-measure cost of lost self-regard and limited personal horizons.

### **The Beauty Contest of Life**

Ads instruct us to assume a self-conscious perspective; to view our physical selves through the censorious eyes of others. To those of us who grew up in the consumer culture, intense selfscrutiny has become an automatic reflex. But this reflex is not God-given; it is the product of decades of deliberate marketing effort. Since the birth of the modern advertising industry in the 1920s, marketers have sought to foster insecurity in consumers. One advertiser, writing in the trade journal *Printer's Ink* in 1926, noted that effective ads must "make [the viewer] selfconscious about matter of course things such as enlarged nose pores, bad breath." Another commented that "advertising helps to keep the masses dissatisfied with their mode of life, discontented with the ugly things around them. Satisfied customers are not as profitable as discontented ones."<sup>6</sup>

Advertisers in the 1920s did everything they could to create profitably discontented customers. Their ads depicted a hostile world peopled with critical strangers who would fasten on some part of one's anatomy and deliver a negative judgment. "The Eyes of Men ... The Eyes of Women judge Your Loveliness Every Day," warned an ad for Camay soap. "You can hardly glance out the window, much less walk in town but that some inquiring eye searches you and your skin. This is the Beauty Contest of Life." For women, of course, participation in this contest was compulsory.

In the 1920s, before Americans had learned to dread ring-around-the-collar and halitosis, blunt instruments were needed to instill the self-consciousness that would eventually fuel the consumer culture. Perhaps because today's audiences are more predisposed to self-examination, contemporary ads can afford to be more subtle. Nonetheless, the Beauty Contest of Life continues. "We'll make a non-competitive suit when they make a non-competitive beach," reads the copy of an ad for Speedo bathing suits.

Countless ads reinforce insecurity by asking women to view their faces and bodies as an ensemble of discrete parts, each in need of a major overhaul. An ad for foundation garments depicts two disembodied backsides and promises "New improved fannies." "If your hair isn't beautiful," warns a shampoo ad, "the rest hardly matters." Another demands to know: "Why aren't your feet as sexy as the rest of you?" And an ad for Dep styling products suggests that we beautify our hair in order to counteract our other glaring flaws: "Your breasts may be too big, too saggy, too pert, too flat, too full, too far apart," the copy reads, "but ... at least you can have your hair the way you want it."

The psychological costs of advertising induced self-consciousness are difficult to quantify. For most women, they include an endless self-scrutiny that is tiresome at best and paralyzing at worst. As

Susan Brownmiller writes in *Femininity*, her classic treatise on the feminine ideal, "Because she is forced to concentrate on the minutiae of her bodily parts, a woman is never free of self-consciousness. She is never quite satisfied, and never secure, for desperate, unending absorption in the drive for perfect appearance call it feminine vanity-is the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind."

Men also lose out in a culture dominated by Iron Maiden imagery; advertising encourages men to measure their girlfriends and wives against a virtually unattainable ideal, perpetuating frustration among both genders. Wolf says that ads don't sell sex, they sell sexual discontent.

Sexual discontent fuels the engines of the consumer culture. The ideal bodies presented in the ads invite comparison to ourselves and our mates, and in the likely event that the comparison is unfavorable to us, the ads suggest we attain the ideal by buying another product. According to Wolf, "Consumer culture is best supported by markets made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects, and the object desired ever-changing, disposable, and dictated by the market."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Thinning of the Iron Maiden**

Women come in an endless array of shapes and sizes, but you'd never know it from looking at ads. In every generation, advertisers issue a new paradigm of female perfection. The very rigidity of the ideal guarantees that most women will fall outside of it, creating a gap between what women are and what they learn they should be. This gap is very lucrative for the purveyors of commercialized beauty.

In the portrayal of women's bodies, the gap has never been wider. The slender reigning ideal provides a stark contrast to the rounder curves of most women's bodies. As an adaptation to the physical demands of childbearing, women's bodies typically have a fat content of around 25 percent, as opposed to 15 percent in men. For much of human history, this characteristic was admired, sought after, and celebrated in the arts. But the twentieth century has seen a steady chipping away at the ideal female figure. A generation ago, according to Naomi Wolf, a typical model weighed 8 percent less than the average woman; more recently she weighs 23 percent less. Most models are now thinner than 95 percent of the female population.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1990s, the fashion industry promoted the "waif look," epitomized by Calvin Klein's young supermodel Kate Moss. At 5'7" and an estimated 100 pounds, "Moss looks as if a strong blast from a blow dryer would waft her away," according to *People* magazine."

Marcelle d'Argy, editor of *British Cosmopolitan*, called fashion photos of Moss "hideous and tragic. If I had a daughter who looked like that, I would take her to see a doctor."<sup>11</sup> As the gap between ideal and reality has widened, women's self-esteem has fallen into the void. A 1984 *Glamour* magazine survey of 33,000 women found that 75 percent of respondents aged eighteen to thirty-five thought they were fat, although only 25 percent were medically overweight. Even 45 percent of the underweight women believed they were fat. Weight was virtually an obsession for many of the *Glamour* respondents, who chose "losing 10-15 pounds" as their most cherished goal in life.<sup>12</sup> Another study in Boston found that fifth-, sixth-, and ninth-graders were much more critical of their body shape after looking at fashion advertising.<sup>13</sup>

Although the glorification of slenderness is sometimes defended in the interests of health, for most women it is anything but healthy. Almost 40 percent of women who smoke say they do so to maintain their weight; one-quarter of those will die of a disease caused by smoking.<sup>14</sup> In one scientific study, researchers found that women's magazines contained ten times as many advertisements and articles promoting weight loss as men's magazines-corresponding exactly to the ratio of eating disorders in women versus men.<sup>15</sup> And recent studies have suggested that it may sometimes be healthier to be overweight than to repeatedly gain and lose weight through "yo-yo dieting."

Surrounded by ads that depict the Iron Maiden as a stick figure, few women can eat in peace. On any given day, 25 percent of American women are dieting, and another 50 percent are finishing, breaking, or starting diets." The *Glamour* survey found that 50 percent of respondents used diet pills, 27 percent used liquid formula diets, 18 percent used diuretics, 45 percent fasted, 18 percent used laxatives, and 15 percent engaged in self-induced vomiting." While women have purged and starved themselves, the diet industry has grown fat.

The cycle of self-loathing and dieting begins early. In a survey of 494 middle-class San Francisco schoolgirls, more than half thought they were fat, yet only 15 percent were medically overweight. And preadolescent dieting has increased "exponentially" in recent years according to Vivian Meehan, president of the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders.<sup>18</sup>

The Iron Maiden may be a stick figure, but she is often endowed with a pair of gravity-defying breasts. The laws of physics dictate that large breasts eventually droop downward, but the breasts depicted in ads are typically high, firm, and round-a shape that is only attainable by very young or surgically altered women. This, too, takes its toll on women's self-esteem. In 1973, *Psychology Today* reported that one quarter of American women were unhappy with the size or shape of their breasts. By 1986, a similar study

found that number had risen to one-third.<sup>19</sup> Tragically, millions of women sacrifice their health-and even their lives-to conform to the shape of the Iron Maiden. Roughly 80 percent of the 150,000 women who have breastimplant surgery each year do so for cosmetic reasons, most often to enlarge their breasts.<sup>20</sup> Recent revelations, which came to light despite suppression by implant-maker Dow Corning, suggest that silicone implants may cause immune-system disorders and death. In response, the Food and Drug Administration has sharply limited implants.

### **"You've Got to Be Young and Beautiful if You Want to Be Loved"**

The Iron Maiden is not shaped like most women. Moreover, she never ages; she is merely replaced with a newer, younger model. Why? A recent TV commercial for Nike and Foot Locker puts it succinctly: "You've got to be young and beautiful if you want to be loved."

Although Adweek's Marketing Week reports an increased demand for "older" models (defined by the advertising industry as women in their late twenties), most professional models are considered over the hill by the time they're twenty-four.<sup>21</sup>

If older women manage to make it into ads at all, visible signs of age are retouched out of their photographs. Naomi Wolf invites us to imagine a parallel-say, if all photographs of blacks in advertising were routinely lightened. "That would be making the same value judgment about blackness that this tampering makes about the value of female life: that less is more," she writes.<sup>22</sup>

Innumerable ads reinforce-and prey on-women's fear of aging. For example, Jean Kilbourne cites an ad headlined "My husband is seeing a younger woman these days ... Me!" Kilbourne notes that "the ad wouldn't work if there wasn't the fear that, if she didn't use the product, he would in fact replace her with a younger woman."<sup>23</sup> Seeking to forestall the inevitable, women spend an estimated \$20 billion worldwide each year on skin-care products that promise to eliminate wrinkles and retard aging. Yet even some marketers of these products privately admit that they are worthless. Buddy Wedderburn, a biochemist for Unilever, confessed that "the effect of rubbing collagen onto the skin is negligible....I don't know of anything that gets into these areas--certainly nothing that will stop wrinkles."<sup>24</sup> In his expose, *The Skin Game: The International Beauty Business Brutally Exposed*, Gerald McKnight called the skin-care industry "a massive con ... a sweetly disguised form of commercial robbery." <sup>25</sup>

Fear of aging also fuels the booming cosmetic-surgery business. Despite the expense and danger, thousands of women submit to the

knife in order to preserve the appearance of youth. Although it may be derided as narcissistic, the choice to undergo surgery may seem to be a rational one in a culture where advertisers and media "disappear" older women-with a retoucher's brush or simple exclusion.

### **Little Miss Makeup**

Girls and teenagers are perhaps most vulnerable to beauty-industry propaganda. For them, advertising is a window into adult life, a lesson in what it means to be a woman. And lacking the sophistication of their older sisters and mothers, girls are less likely to distinguish between fact and advertising fiction.

Marketers increasingly target the lucrative teen and preadolescent market with ads for beauty products. And they are having an effect: Female teens spend an average of \$506 per year on cosmetics and beauty salon visits. Most wear makeup by the time they are thirteen, and 26 percent wear perfume every day.<sup>26</sup> Everyounger girls are being fitted for miniature Iron Maidens: Christian Dior makes bras and panties with lace and ruffles for preschoolers.<sup>27</sup> One toymaker produces a Little Miss Makeup doll, which looks like a five- or six-year-old girl. When water is applied, the doll sprouts eyebrows, colored eyelids, fingernails, tinted lips, and a heart-shaped beauty mark.<sup>28</sup>

Sexualized images of little girls may have dangerous implications in a world where 450,000 American children were reported as victims of sexual abuse in 1993.<sup>29</sup> It also robs girls of their brief freedom from the constraints of the beauty imperative; they have little chance to develop a sense of bodily self-worth and integrity before beginning to compare themselves to the airbrushed young beauties in Seventeen.

If little girls are presented as sex objects, grown women are depicted as children. A classic example is an ad that ran in the 1970s for Love's Baby Soft cosmetics. The ad featured a grown woman in a little girl dress, licking a lollipop and hiking up her short skirt next to phallic-shaped bottles of Love's Baby Soft. The tag line read, "Because innocence is sexier than you think." And an ad for Cutex lipstick shows a cartoon of a woman's bright red lips with a pacifier stuck in them, and the caption "lipstick that makes your lips baby soft." Such ads, says Kilbourne, "send out a powerful sexual message at the same time they deny it, which is exactly what the ads are telling women to do. The real message is 'don't be a mature sexual being, stay like a little girl'-passive, powerless, and dependent."<sup>30</sup>

### **Women's Magazines and the Iron Maiden**

Advertising's images of the Iron Maiden are everywhere, but women's magazines deserve a special mention for promoting their commercialized beauty ideal. These magazines, so widely read that they are nicknamed "cash cows" in the publishing trade, have a nearly symbiotic relationship with advertisers. Gloria Steinem, describing Ms. magazine's largely unsuccessful attempts to attract ad revenue (before that magazine went adfree), explains that advertisers for women's products demand "supportive editorial atmosphere," that is, "clothing advertisers expect to be surrounded by fashion spreads (especially ones that credit their designers); and shampoo, fragrance, and beauty products in general usually insist on positive editorial coverage of beauty subjects."

Advertisers influence the content of virtually all media, but their stranglehold over women's magazines is especially unyielding. Steinem notes, "If Time and Newsweek had to lavish praise on cars in general and credit GM in particular to get GM ads, there would be a scandal maybe even a criminal investigation. When women's magazines from Seventeen to Lear's praise beauty products in general and credit Revlon in particular to get ads, it's just business as usual."<sup>31</sup>

Women's magazines are the manifestos of Iron Maidenhood, typically running "objective" editorial copy that touts the products advertised in their pages. These ads too narrowly define the acceptable contours of female shape and appearance. And although women's magazines increasingly publish articles on explicitly feminist themes, their ties to advertisers prevent them from challenging the sacred Iron Maiden. For example, Steinem tells of the time Ms. published an exclusive cover story about Soviet women exiled for publishing underground feminist books. This journalistic coup won Ms. a Front Page Award but lost it an advertising account with Revlon. "Why?" asks Steinem, "Because the Soviet women on our cover [were] not wearing makeup."<sup>32</sup>

### **The Kitchen and the Bedroom: Limited Views of Women**

Clearly, ads present unrealistic images of women's faces and bodies. just as insidiously, they present highly circumscribed views of women's lives. One study of magazine ads from 1960 to 1979—a time when women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers—found that ads failed to depict a significant increase in women's employment outside the home. The study also noted that women in ads were apt to be, portrayed in traditional female roles: cooking, cleaning, caring for children." And a more recent survey of Canadian broadcast ads concluded that men were far more likely than women to be presented as experts or authorities.<sup>34</sup>

A quarter-century after the rebirth of the women's movement, women in ads are still depicted as housewives obsessed with ring-

around the-collar and spots on the dishes. If they do work outside the home, they are presented as supermoms who cook, clean, take care of the kids, then slip into something sexy all with the help of Brand X. (Some ads parrot the slogans of the women's movement while their content explicitly refutes them. As we explain in Chapter 5, "Co-opting Civic Groups, Culture, Sports," advertising has appropriated the jargon, if not the values, of feminism.)

Ads that show working women usually focus on their appearance and sexual availability. An ad for Hennessy cognac depicts an afterhours office scene: While a man talks on the phone, a female co-worker in a low-cut blouse seductively hands him a drink. The Maidenform woman disembarks from an airplane, briefcase in hand; her businesslike raincoat blows open to reveal lingerie. Women's work is trivialized, as in an ad declaring that "Phoebe chose to work, not because she had to, but because it gave her a place to wear her Braeburn sweaters."

To be fair, there have been modest improvements in advertising's portrayal of women since the 1970s. And recently, women have been appointed to high-level positions at some of the nation's leading ad agencies. Although the industry is still heavily dominated by men, the ascension of women to top jobs is prompting some agencies to reevaluate their messages to women.<sup>35</sup>

But ads have a long way to go. Until ads depict women in a realistic way, women will continue to measure themselves against an inhuman ideal. And until they are released from the rigid confines of the Iron Maiden, women will continue to seek commercial remedies for imaginary flaws.

## Sex as a Commodity

The naked, apparently lifeless body of a woman is draped over the shoulder of a brawny, muscled man. Two men lie next to each other on a bed, one with his hand inside his pants. A woman kneels on the beach, her breasts bursting out of a loose white shirt, which is all she has on.

PENTHOUSE? PLAYGIRL? HUSTLER? Nope, guess again. These images are from ads for Obsession perfume, Calvin Klein sportswear, and Express jeans, respectively. And they all appeared in mainstream, mass-circulation magazines and family newspapers.

Sexual images have been a staple of advertising since the very birth of the industry. Women's faces and bodies adorned Coca-Cola calendars back in the 1890s and have been employed to sell virtually everything since. But in recent decades, sexual imagery in advertising has become more common, more explicit, more

"Sexual themes... are being used as never before to cut through the commercial clutter and grab the consumer's attention."<sup>37</sup> A publicist for Bugle Boy clothes puts it less prosaically Blaming the recession for his company's use of scantily clad female models, he confesses that "in an extremely competitive environment, you kind of go back to T & A."<sup>38</sup>

Many ads tread close to the pornographic border. For instance, an ad for Calvin Mein's Obsession shows a naked man and woman on a swing, pressed against each other. An ad for Candies shoes features a naked man in a chair with a naked woman sitting astride him (some tamer versions of the same ad had shorts painted on him, but the woman is always presumed unclothed). A Wilke-Rodriguez clothing ad features an obvious simulation of intercourse-on a city rooftop, a woman in nothing but high heels straddles a man in jeans.

Of course, sexually explicit imagery is proliferating elsewhere in popular culture as well. Television, movies, and music videos now routinely air images that would have been taboo just ten years ago. Advertisers take advantage of, and contribute to, that trend and push the envelope of titillation to attract the attention of potential customers.

Pornography itself has grown to be a \$7 billion industry worldwide.<sup>39</sup> As porn has become more pervasive, mainstream culture and advertising have increasingly adopted its visual conventions and messages. Many of the sexual tableaux we are bombarded with daily are not of intimate, consensual sex, which one might term erotica. Rather, they present bodies, or body parts, with the cool estrangement of commodities. Or they depict sex that is brutal and violent. Both of these qualities-objectification and violence-are common in pornography. The issue, then, is not just that we are inundated with sexual images but the kind of sexual images we are inundated with.

### **Objects of Desire**

Perhaps the most commonplace sexually exploitative ads are those that display women's (and, increasingly, men's) bodies to sell products. These ads are everywhere. The corner store is plastered with posters of busty models in wet t-shirts, hawking Budweiser. On a billboard that hovers over a busy intersection, a young woman in a clingy bathing suit arches her back in apparent sexual ecstasy beside an enlarged bottle of Wild Irish Rose. In an ad for Bugle Boy clothes, the camera moves in on the pelvis of a model in panties, pans out to show barely clothed beauties at the beach, and so on, ad nauseam.

The use of women's bodies in ads is essentially a cheap trick that marketers use instead of making more thoughtful arguments on

behalf of their products. The mechanism used in these ads is quite simple: Attractive bodies are employed to grab attention and stimulate desire, which advertisers hope will then be transferred to the product. Buy the beer, get the girl. In this way, women's bodies are equated with commodities, presented as the rewards of consumption.

By instructing men to regard women's bodies as objects, ads help create an atmosphere that devalues women as people, encourages sexual harassment, and worse. For example, in 1991, four women employees of Stroh's Brewery sued their employer, charging that the company's sexist ads gave the company's imprimatur to sexist attitudes and sexual harassment in the workplace. Especially targeted in the lawsuit was an ad campaign for Old Milwaukee beer (made by Stroh's) that featured the Swedish Bikini Team, a bunch of buxom, bewigged blonds in string bikinis. At the Stroh's plant in St. Paul, Minnesota, where Bikini Team posters and pornographic materials lined the walls, women employees claimed to be subjected to obscene and sexist comments, slaps on the buttocks, and male coworkers following them home.<sup>40</sup>

Many ads of this genre take the dehumanization of women a step farther by focusing on body parts—another convention of pornography. A pair of shapely female legs emerges from a box of cereal. A woman's torso is juxtaposed against a photo of a sportscar; we are invited to admire the curves of both. Three women walk along a sunny beach, umbrellas obscuring all but their bikini-clad backsides. Women in these ads are not even whole objects; they have been reduced to an assemblage of dismembered parts.

Such ads degrade women, and men are diminished by them as well. For one thing, exploitative ads insult men's intelligence. One Canadian advertiser, defending a campaign for Molson beer that featured women's body parts, reveals this contempt: "I am playing upon the less positive attributes of females," he said, "but I have to put my personal feelings aside when I'm addressing the great unwashed. To them, the most attractive qualities about a woman are her measurements."<sup>41</sup>

Men's bodies, too, are no longer immune from exploitation in advertising. Recent years have seen a veritable deluge of beefcake photos in ads glorifying men's muscled torsos, backs, and thighs. Often aimed at women, who make the majority of consumer purchases, these ads are the mirror image of "t & a." Typical of the genre is an ad for Coot Water cologne, which features the torso of a watersprayed nude male basking in the sun. A Calvin Klein ad supplement to Vanity Fair contained no less than twenty-seven bare-chested and two bare-bottomed men, two bare-bottomed and four topless women. In a 1994 Hyundai television commercial, two women coyly estimate men's physical endowment, based on the car they drive. While assuming that men in fancy cars are lacking

elsewhere, the women are dearly impressed by the Hyundai driver:  
\*Wonder what he's got under the hood."

"Women are recognizing that they like men's bodies," Judith Langer, head of a market research firm, told the New York Times. "It used to be that men offered power and women offered beauty. Now men have to be on their toes and in shape. They can't allow themselves to go to pot."<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, many men feel uneasy about being held to the standard presented in the ads-as women have been for generations. Women's unclothed bodies have proliferated in ads and other media, but male nudity has historically remained off-limits. Interestingly, much outcry about sex in advertising has accompanied the crossing of this sacred line. For example, a New York Times article entitled "Has Madison Avenue Gone Too Far?" cites ten examples of sexually suggestive ads, all of which featured male models.<sup>43</sup> Exhibiting a similar double standard, Sports Illustrated editors refused to run a 1993 Adidas ad that featured a Canadian soccer team of naked men squatting and covering their genitalia with soccer balls, trophies, and their hands.<sup>44</sup> Sports Illustrated is far less prudish when it comes to the annual swimsuit issue, which flaunts nubile women in tiny bikinis. Ubiquitous images of women's bodies seem somehow natural in a culture that sanctions the objectification of women; subjecting male anatomy to the same cold, critical gaze is going "too far."

### **Advertising Violence Against Women**

In 1977, when Vogue published Chris Von Wangenheim's now infamous fashion spread of Doberman pinschers attacking a model, many viewers were appalled. Today, Von Wangenheim's imagery seems almost restrained. In an ad for Newport cigarettes, a pair of men tackle two screaming women, pulling one by the hair. Another Newport ad shows a man forcing a woman's head down to get her mouth around a spurting garden hose. In an ad for Gotcha sportswear, an attractive young murder victim dangles from a couch. The red design on her shirt resembles a stylized gunshot wound; her legs are splayed apart. A young model in an ad for Georges Marciano clothes cradles her head and cries; her tousled hair and disheveled clothes suggest sexual struggle. A man sitting next to her looks away impassively. An Old Spice cologne ad shows a man leaning over a woman who is playfully pushing him away; the huge headline says "No," but she is smiling. The message: Don't take No for an answer; she probably doesn't mean it.

Violence against women in ads raises many of the same questions-and sparks the same debate-as violent pornography. Some analysts discern a link between eroticized images of violence against women and the escalating incidence of real-life rape and abuse. Others claim that such images actually defuse men's aggression toward women or that these images reflect the broader oppression of women but don't

cause it. Still others legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon foremost among them-argue that sexually violent images are in themselves harmful to women, regardless of whether they incite "real" violence.

Again, we are stuck with the chicken-and-egg question of whether ads cause harmful social effects or simply mirror them. In either case, advertising fuels the perception that women are things, to be used or abused as men see fit. "Turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step in justifying violence against that person," says Jean Kilbourne.<sup>45</sup>

In complaining about sex in ads, one risks being accused of puritanism. Can we object to the use of sex in ads without sounding like Jesse Helms or Anita Bryant? Doesn't the proliferation of sexual imagery simply reflect the loosening of repressive sexual mores that were rooted-let's not forget-in sexist, patriarchal ideology?

The problem is that repression has been replaced by exploitation. Sex in ads is inherently exploitative; it seeks to arouse us in order to sell us things, to press our sexuality into the service of the consumer culture. The rigid gender roles of the 1950s denied men and women their full range of sexual and human possibilities, but so does the commodified sex depicted in advertising. Ads that depict women and men as sexual objects to be bought, admired, and consumed (or brutalized) offer a bleak, limited view of sexuality.

### Notes

1. Jean Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly*, film distributed by Cambridge Documentary Films, Cambridge, Mass., 1987.
2. Quoted in Stuart Ewen, *AllConsuming Images: The Politics of Style in Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 87.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Molly O'Neill, "5 Diet Companies Ask U.S. for Uniform Rules on Ads," *New York Times*, August 25, 1992.
5. Figures given are for both men and women. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 17; Elaine Brumberg, *Save Your Money, Save Your Face* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. xiii.
6. Quoted in Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 39.
7. Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1984), p. 51.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
9. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 184. Wolf does not specify the years being compared. It is worth noting that the prevalence of overweight among adult women remained fairly constant from 1960 to 1980, but then rose by one-third during the 1980s (Roberti. Kuczmarski et

- al., "Increasing Prevalence of Overweight Among U.S. Adults," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 272, July 20, 1994, p. 205).
10. Louise Lague and Alison Lynne, "How Thin Is Too Thin?" *People Magazine*, September 20, 1993, p. 74.
  11. Quoted in *ibid.*
  12. S. C. Wooley, "Feeling Fat in a Thin Society," *Glamour*, February 1984, p. 198.
  13. Alison Bass, "'Anorexic Marketing' Faces Boycott," *Boston Globe*, April 25, 1994, P. 1.
  14. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 229.
  15. Arnold E. Andersen and Lisa DiDomenico, "Diet Vs. Shape Content of Popular Male and Female Magazines: A Dose-Response Relationship to the Incidence of Eating Disorders?" *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 11, no. 3, 1992, pp. 283-287.
  16. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 185.
  17. Wooley, "Feeling Fat in a Thin Society."
  18. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 215.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
  20. Lena Williams, "Woman's Image in a Mirror: Who Defines What She Sees?" *New York Times*, February 6, 1992, p. A1.
  21. Cara Appelbaum, "Beyond the Blonde Bombshell," *Adweek's Marketing Week*, June 3, 1991.
  22. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 83.
  23. Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly*.
  24. Quoted in Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, P. ilo.
  25. Gerald McKnight, *The Skin Game: The international Beauty Business Brutally Exposed* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989), p. 20.
  26. Cara Appelbaum, "Thirteen Going on Twenty-one," *Adweek's Marketing Week*, March 11, 1991.
  27. *Media Watch* (Santa Cruz, Calif. Media Watch), Fall 1990, p. 2.
  28. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, p. 215.
  29. Karen McCurdy and Deborah Darol "Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1993 Annual Fifty State Survey," working paper no. 808, The National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, a program of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, Chicago, Ill., April 1994, pp. 3, 7.
  30. Kilbourne, *Still Killing Us Softly*.
  31. Gloria Steinem, "Sex, Lies, and Advertising," *Ms.*, July-August 1990, p. 19.
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
  33. England and Gardner, "How Adverrising Portrays Men and Women," p. 2.
  34. Canadian Advertising Foundation, "Sex y 24, 1987. Role Stereotyping Guidelines," Jul
  35. Kim Foltz, "Women Deflate Some Adland Images," *New York Times*, November 17, 1991.
  36. Zachary Schiller, Mark Landler, Julia Flynn Siler, "Sex Still Sells, but So Does Sensitivity," *Business Week*, March 18, 1991, P.

- 100.
37. Stuart Elliott, "Has Madison Avenue Gone Too Far?" New York Times, December 15, 1991, sec. 3, p. 1.
  38. Leslie Savan, "In the Red Again, - Villlage Voice, January 7, 1992, p. 45.
  39. Wolf, The Beauty Myth, p. 79.
  40. Henry J. Reske, "Stroh's Ads Targeted," ABAjournal, February 1992. In 1993, however, the court ruled that the ads could not be entered as evidence in the harassment trial ("Ad Can't Be Evidence," Wall Streetjournal, November 9, 1993).
  41. Quoted in Joanne Pohn, "Beer Ads Offend," MediaWatch Bulletin (Vancouver, B.C.: MediaWatch) 3, no. 2, Winter 1990, p. 4.
  42. Stuart Elliott, "Looking at Male Bodies," New York Times, December 15, 1991, sec. 3, p. 6.
  43. Elliott, "Has Madison Avenue Gone Too Far?"
  44. Anne Swardson, "The Shoe's on the Other Foot?" Washington Post, June 30, 1993.
  45. Kilbourne, Still Killing Us Softly.
-