

Marketing Madness

*A Survival Guide
for a Consumer Society*

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and

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Center for the Study of Commercialism

with a Foreword by Ralph Nader

Westview Press

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Sexism and Sexuality in Advertising

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."¹

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

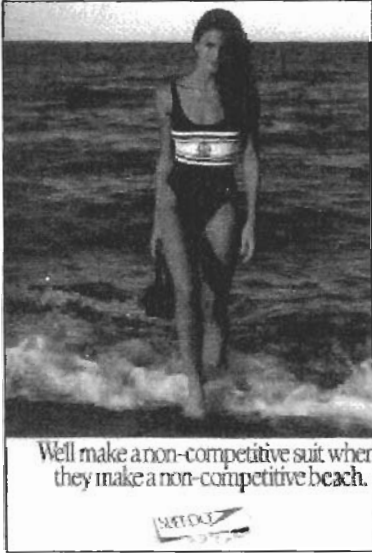
are bleached white; blemishes, wrinkles, and stray hairs are airbrushed away. According to Louis Grubb, a leading New York retoucher, "Almost every photograph you see for a national advertiser these days has been worked on by a retoucher to some degree...Fundamentally, our job is to correct the basic deficiencies in the original photograph or, in effect, to improve upon the appearance of reality."² 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.³ 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;⁴ \$7 billion on cosmetics; \$300 million on cosmetic surgery.⁵ 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 self-scrutiny 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



The Beauty Contest of Life:
Advertising encourages women to compare themselves to one another, fostering feelings of competition and inadequacy.

trade journal *Printer's Ink* in 1926, noted that effective ads must "make [the viewer] self-conscious 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."⁶

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 audi-

ences 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."⁷

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

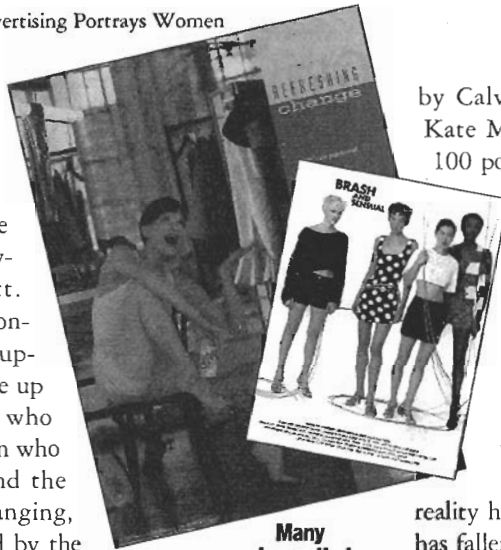
ourselves and our mates, and in the likely event that the comparison is unfavorable to us, the ads suggest we attain the ideal by buying another product. According to Wolf, "Consumer culture is best supported by markets made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects,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

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.⁹

In the early 1990s, the fashion industry promoted the "waif look," epitomized



Many charge that superthin models provoke eating disorders in women.

The Diet Sprite ad (top left), which says that its model's nickname is "Skeleton," was the target of a boycott by Boston-based BAM (Boycott Anorexic Marketing).

Top right, gaunt models pose for *Elle* magazine, wrapped in cords suggestive of bondage. Below, supermodel Kate Moss embodies the fashion industry's "waif" look.



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.¹⁰ 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."¹¹

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.¹² Another study in Boston found that fifth-, sixth-, and ninth-graders were much more critical of their body shape after looking at fashion advertising.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 school-girls, more than half thought they were fat, yet only 15 percent were medically over-

weight. And preadolescent dieting has increased "exponentially" in recent years, according to Vivian Meehan, president of the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders.¹⁸

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 simi-

lar study found that number had risen to one-third.¹⁹ 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 breast-implant surgery each year do so for cosmetic reasons, most often to enlarge their breasts.²⁰ 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.

"Slim" cigarettes trade on tobacco's reputation as an appetite suppressant. Almost 40 percent of women who smoke say they do so to maintain their weight; one-quarter of those will die of disease caused by smoking.

"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.²¹

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.²²

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.”²³

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.”²⁴ In his exposé, *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.”²⁵

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.²⁶ Ever-younger girls are being fitted for miniature Iron Maidens: Christian Dior makes bras and panties with lace and ruffles for preschoolers.²⁷ 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.²⁸

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 1993.²⁹ 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-



Avon promises to erase the signs of aging from women’s faces.

Implying that success is proportional to breast size, a cosmetic surgeon beseeches women to “Reshape Your Future Through Breast Enhancement Surgery.”

RESHAPE YOUR FUTURE Through Breast Enhancement Surgery



Breast augmentation surgery can give you larger, more firm, uplifted breasts, reshaping you for a more pleasing appearance.

To arrange a free confidential consultation with a board certified surgeon, call:

Roger W. Anderson, M.D.
COSMETIC SURGERY

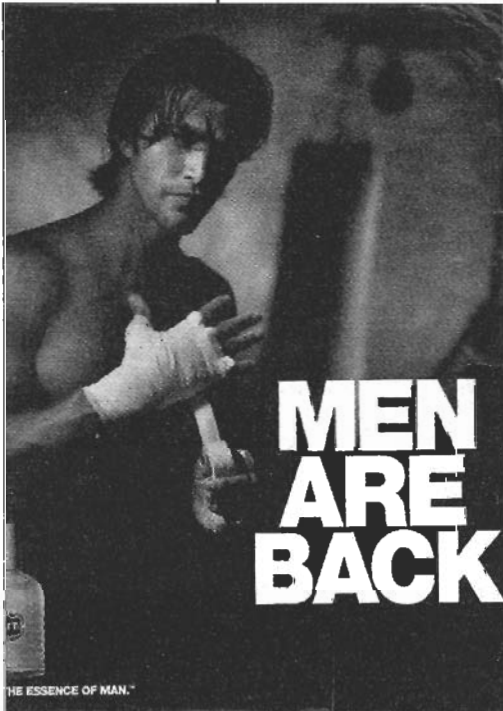
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THE STRONG SILENT TYPE: MEN IN ADS

We have focused here on the portrayal of women in advertising because the barrage of demeaning, sexist images of women causes so much harm. But men, too, are hurt by sexist ads. Clearly, advertisers have learned from women that fomenting insecurity through unattainable media images is good for business. The masculine ideal, as perpetrated by advertising, is not quite as rigid as the Iron Maiden, but it calls on men to exude an aura of physical strength, power, dominance, and detachment. Such men never crack a smile, indeed they practically scowl at us from the magazine page or television screen. In an ad for Brut cologne, for example, an angry-looking muscular boxer wraps his hand with gauze; "Men Are Back" reads the headline. Men in such ads have no need to ingratiate themselves with

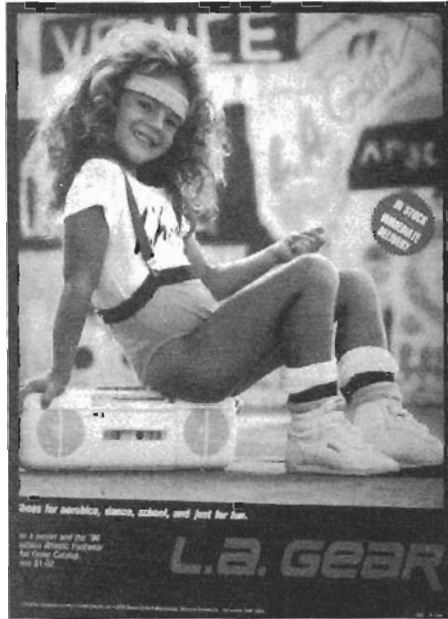
a hint of sensitivity—or even a pleasant expression; they are perfectly self-sufficient. Many exist in a female-free masculine paradise, like the Marlboro Man. If a man is shown with a woman, he appears to be merely tolerating her presence while she clings desperately or prostrates herself before him. Of course, men do deviate from this ideal in ads, but the deviants are often presented for purposes of mockery. Husbands are the butt of much ribbing in ads; the surest way to be demoted from macho sex god to buffoon is to get married. Media critic Jean Kilbourne notes that although "single men are generally presented as independent and powerful, married men are often presented as idiots."¹ The one-dimensional portrayal of masculinity in ads exacts a personal cost. Kilbourne observes that it is as though the full range of human characteristics had been divided arbitrarily into "masculine" and "feminine"—and the feminine half substantially devalued. Women are taught to repress their "masculine" traits (such as self-determination and aggression)

and men are taught to repress, and loathe, their "feminine" traits (such as vulnerability and compassion). In this way, ads help prevent both men and women from realizing their potential as full, complex human beings capable of independence *and* vulnerability, aggression *and* compassion. Advertisers also impose a physical ideal on men. Though much less prominent than Iron Maiden imagery, ads for cologne, deodorant, beer, and other masculine products feature muscular models with flawlessly sculpted bodies, square jaws, and full heads of hair. Just as media-induced self-consciousness among women leads to serious health problems, men are suffering from eating disorders (about 10 percent of the number of women)² and resorting to cosmetic surgery to build up pectoral, buttock, and calf muscles; reduce nipple size; and reshape their ears.³ The use of muscle-building steroids is also on the rise among young men.⁴

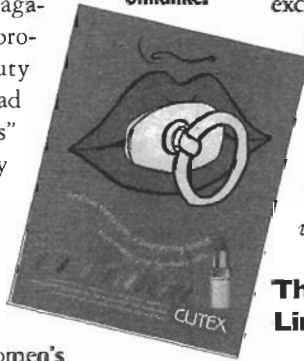


Men Are Back—and boy are they mad! The male ideal, according to advertising, is brawn and brutishness.

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."³⁰



Above: a toddler strikes a seductive pose. Below: Cutex encourages women to remain childlike.



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 *Mt.* magazine's largely unsuccessful attempts to attract ad revenue (before that magazine went ad-free), 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."³¹

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 *Mt.* published an exclusive cover story about Soviet women exiled for publishing underground feminist books. This journalistic coup won *Mt.* 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."³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴

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

Some advertisers characterize women as crazed shopping junkies. Below, a woman who owns 82 pairs of shoes confesses "I used to tell my father I needed the money for piano lessons."

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 after-

hours 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 improve-

ments 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.³⁵

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.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- *Complain about sexist ads and boycott products advertised in an offensive manner. The current rash of sexist ads may stem from a perception that women won't object; according to a senior editor at Adweek magazine, "Advertisers were more afraid of offending women... when feminists were more unified and quicker to protest."³⁶*
- *Show Still Killing us Softly to your friends, family, classmates, or community group. Jean Kilbourne's insightful film about advertising images of women is available on video from Cambridge Documentary Films (a nonprofit group): P.O. Box 385, Cambridge, MA 02139, 617-354-3677.*
- *If you have kids, make sure they are exposed to positive, nonstereotypical images of women and men. Talk with them about the content of ads.*
- *Don't give in to the Iron Maiden. Don't buy rip-off cosmetics or fall for hyped-up diet products. And, tough as it may be in this culture, cultivate an appreciation for your own, absolutely unique, beauty.*

