Marketing Madness

A Survival Guide

for a Consumer Society

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and

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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 womanhood, 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.
Fourteen-year-old Lisa arranges herself in the mirror—clutching her stomach, sucking in her cheeks, pulling her legs up on an approximation of a sultry pose. It’s so me, 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 pulling of disgust. Or if I had the right shoes, and makeup...

E verywhere 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 invent the notion that women should be valued as ornaments; women have always been marketed 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 5’9” frame. Her eyes are a deep vio-
et-blue, her teeth perfectly 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 cul-
ture.”

The flawlessness of the Iron Maiden is, in fact, an illusion created by makeup artists, pho-
tographers, and photo retouch-
ers. Each image is painstakingly worked over: Teeth and eyebrows are bleached white, blemishes, wrinkles, and stray hairs are airbrushed away. According to Louis Snell, 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 cor-
rect the basic deficiencies in the original photo-
ograph or, in effect, to improve upon the appear-
ance of reality.” In some cases, a portrait 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. 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 appear-
ance: $53 billion on weight loss; $7 billion on cosmetics; $300 million on cosmetic surgery. 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 perspec-
tive; 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 market-
ing effort. Since the birth of the modern
advertising industry in the 1920s, mar-
keters 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)
self-
conscious about mat-
ter of course things
such as enlarged nose,
poor breath."
Another commiser-
ted that "advertising helps to keep the
masses dissatisfied with their mode
of
life, discontented with the ugly things
around them. Satis-
fied customers are
not as probable as
discontented ones."

Advertisers in the 1920s did every-
thing they could to create profitably dis-
contented customers. Their ads depicted
a brittle world peopled with critical
strangers who would fasten on some part of
one's anatomy and deliver a negative
judgment. "The Eyes of Man," "The Eyes
of Women Judge Your Loveliness Every
Day," warned an ad for Conant 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 baldness, bust instruments were
needed to install the self-consciousness
that would eventually fuel the consumer
culture. Perhaps because today's audi-
ences are more predisposed to self-exami-
nation, contemporary ads can afford to be
quite 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 Bonded 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 dis-
embodied halves and proclaims "New
improved fantasies." "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 Deep
styling produces suggests that we beautify
our hair in order to counteract our other
glimmering flaws: "Your breasts may be too
big, too saggy, too pert, too full, too
far apart," the copy reads, "but...at
least you 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 clas-
sic 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 deceptive, unending absorp-
tion in the strive for perfect appearance—
call it feminine vanity—is the ultimate
restriction on freedom of mind." Men
also lose out in a culture domi-
nated by Leo Maidan imagery; advertis-
ing encourages men to measure their girl-
friends and wives against a virtually un-
attainable ideal, perpetuating frustration
among both genders. Wili says that ad-
ners don't sell sex; they sell sexual discon-
tent. Sexual discontent fuels the engines
of the consumer culture. The ideal bodily
package conceived in the ads invite compani-
ion..."
ourselves and our mates, and in the likely event that the comparison is unfavorable to us, the ad suggest we attain the ideal by buying another product. According to Wolf, “Consumable culture is best served by marketers made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects, and the objects desired ever-changing, disposable, and dictated by the marker.”

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 slimmer 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.

In the early 1990s, the fashion industry promoted the “waist 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 “hilarious and tragic. If I had a daughter who looked like that, I would take her to see a doctor.”

As the gap between ideal and reality has widened, women’s self-esteem has fallen into the void. A 1984 Glamour magazine survey of 53,000 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.

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

Although the glorification of slenderness is sometimes defended in the interest 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. 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. 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 vitamin supplements, and 13 percent were 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 Vivien Meehan, president of the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders.

The Iron Maiden may be a sick figure, but she is often endowed with a pair of gravity-defying breasts. The laws of physics dictate that large breasts eventually drop 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 1975, Psychology Today reported that one quarter of American women were unhappy with the size or shape of their breasts. By 1980, a similar study found that number had risen to one-third. Tragically, millions of women sacrifice their health—and even their lives—to conform to the shape of the Iron Maiden. Roughly 40 percent of the 150,000 women who have breast-implant surgery each year do so for cosmetic reasons, most often to enhance their breasts. 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), more professional models are considered over the hill by the time they're twenty-five. If older women manage to make it
into ads at all, visible signs of age are pummeled 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.

Numerable ads reinforce—and prey on—women's fear of aging. For example, Jen 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.

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, confided 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.

In his expose, The Skin Game: The International Beauty Business Brutally Exposed, Gerald McKnight called the skin-care industry "a massive con... a neatly disguised form of commercial robbery.

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 denied 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 wrinkle or brush of 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. Even younger girls are being fitted for miniatures. Christian Dior makes bras and panties with lace and ruffles for precosulata. One toy manufacturers 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.

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. It also rob girls of their brief freedom from the constraints of the beauty imperative; they have little chance to develop a sense of body 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...
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 sensibility—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 pros- trates 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 ped 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 idials." 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 "shredded arbi- trarily into "masculine" and "feminine"—and the feminine half spuriously devalued. Women are taught to repress their "masculine" traits (such as self-determination and aggres- sion) and men are taught to repress, and loathe, their "feminine" traits (such as vulnerability and compasion). 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 com- passion. 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 flaw- lessly 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) and resorting to cosmetic surgery to build up pec- toral, buttock, and calf muscles; reduce niple size; and reshape their ears. The use of muscle-building steroids is also on the rise among young men."
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 Mc. 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 coincide their designs); and shampoo, fragrance, and beauty products in general usually insist on positive editorial coverage of beauty subjects."

Advertisers influence the contents 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 Sassy to Lear's praise beauty products in general and credit Revlon in particular to get ads, it's just business as usual." 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 ads tie advertisers prevent them from challenging the sacred Iron Maiden. For example, Steinem tells of the time Mc. published an exclusive cover story about Soviet women exited for publishing underground feminist books. This journalistic coup "won Mc. 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."
Canadian broadcast ads concluded that men were far more likely than women to be presented as experts or authorities.2

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 dish-
es. If they do work outside the home, they are presented as supermoms who cook, clean, 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 move-
ment 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 usu-
ally 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 seductive-
ly hands him a drink. The Maid-
enform woman disembarks from an airplane, brief-
case in hand; her businessmman’s
coat 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 Brae-
burn 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 posi-
tions 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 re-
value their messages to women.2

But ads have a long way to go.
Used ads depict women in a realistic
way, women will continue to mea-
sure 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 imagi-
mary flaws.

WHAT YOU CAN DO
• Complain about sexist ads and boycott prod-
  ucts advertised in an offensive manner. The
current rash of sexist ads may stem from a
perception that women won’t object; accord-
ing to a senior editor at Adweek maga-
azine, “Advertisers were more afraid of
offending women... when feminism was
more unified and quicker to priss.”

• Show Still Killing Us Softly to your
  friends, family, classmates, or community
  group. Joan Kilbourn’s insightful film
about advertising images of women is avail-
able on video from Cambridge Documentary
Films (w. mugugof group). P.O. Box 383,
Cambridge, MA 02139, 617-354-3677.

• If you have kids, make sure they are
  exposed to positive, non-stereotypical images
  of women and men. Talk with them about
the content of ads.

• Don’t give in to the Iron Maiden. Don’t
  buy nip-off summies or fall for lip-up-dit
  products. And, tough as it may be in this
culture, cultivate an appreciation for your
men, absolutely unripe, beauty.