Feminist efforts to redefine gender ideals for advertisers . . . met with disbelief, resistance and downright hostility.
—Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, Gender, Race, and Class in Media

This chapter focuses on gender representations in advertising. Ad deconstruction reveals a pattern of symbolic and institutionalized sexism. Sexism is any attitude, behavior institutional arrangement, or policy that favors one gender over another. Advertising sells much more than products; it sells values and cultural representations, such as success and sexuality, as we have seen.

**Gender Representations**

What kind of representations does advertising produce? It creates a mythical, WASP-oriented world in which no one is ever ugly, overweight, poor, toiling, or physically or mentally disabled (unless you count the housewives who talk to little men in toilet bowls) (Kilbourne 1989).

Advertising has a great deal to say about gender identity. Ads use visual images of men and women to grab our attention and persuade. They are really projecting gender display—the ways in which we think men and women behave—not the ways they actually do behave (Goffman 1976). Such portrayals or images are not reflective of social reality. In advertising, for example, women are primarily depicted as sexual objects or sexual agents.

Because traditional gender roles are so easily recognized by consumers, they figure conspicuously in the imagery of mass media. Gender images hit at the heart of individual identity. What better place to choose than an arena of social life that can be communicated at a glance and that reaches into the core of individual identity (Jhally 1990)?

In tracing the evolution of ad campaigns over time in relation to changing social developments and patterns of intergroup tensions, we are actually discerning the cultural codes of gender, class, and race. It is important to expand media literacy in order to endure the invasion of media images, messages, and displays that is flooding our senses.

Advertising images provide culturally sanctioned ideal types of masculinity and feminity. Advertisers targeting women consumers subscribe to very limited notions of what constitutes femininity (e.g., dependency, concern with superficial beauty, fixation on family and nurturance, fear of technology) and, consequently, “feminine” buying patterns (Kilbourne 1989; Steinem 1990). “Feminist efforts to redefine gender ideals for advertisers in
the 1970s and 1980s met with disbelief, resistance and
downright hostility” (Dines and Humez 1995, 73).

Advertisers sometimes attempt to control the editorial content of the media by trying to censor feature stories that might conflict with their interests. For example, an episode of Little House on the Prairie that featured a pack of wild dogs threatening children was pulled when the sponsor, a leading dog food manufacturer, objected. This shows the lengths to which advertisers will go to protect their financial stake in their products and services.

Two general patterns seem to emerge concerning gender and advertising. First, ads tell us that there is a big difference between what is appropriate or expected behavior for men and women, or for boys and girls. Second, advertising and other mass media inculcate in consumers the cultural assumption that men are dominant and women are passive and subordinate. A key component of the passive, subordinate role is that women lack a voice. The sexual objectification of women requires that they remain silent (figure 3.1). Moreover, while the masculine gender role is valued, the feminine counterpart is disregarded or devalued. A few examples from a 1970 children’s book (figure 3.2) show how rigid and exclusive gender roles are set, even in early childhood.

Ads portray women as sex objects (figure 3.3) or mindless domestics pathologically obsessed with cleanliness (figure 3.4) (Kilbourne 1989).
**Perfect Provocateur:**
Young, Beautiful, and Seductive

Her face was white and perfectly smooth . . . every blemish or flaw she ever had gone away, though what those flaws had been I couldn’t have told you. She was perfect now. . . . She had the fullness of young womanhood.

—Anne Rice, *The Vampire Lestat*

Advertisers have an enormous financial stake in a narrow ideal of femininity that they promote, especially in beauty product ads (Kilbourne 1989). The image of the ideal beautiful woman (see figure 3.5) may perhaps be captured with the concept of the provocateur (an ideal image that arouses a feeling or reaction). The exemplary female prototype in advertising, regardless of product or service, displays youth (no lines or wrinkles), good looks, sexual seductiveness (Baudrillard 1990), and perfection (no scars, blemishes, or even pores) (Kilbourne 1989).

The provocateur is not human; rather, she is a form or hollow shell representing a female figure. Accepted attractiveness is her only attribute. She is slender, typically tall and long-legged (figure 3.6). Women are constantly held to this unrealistic standard of beauty. If they fail to attain it, they are led to feel guilty and ashamed. Cultural ideology tells women that they will not be desirable to, or loved by, men unless they are physically perfect. Figure 3.7, an ad for Bijan, whose product line includes menswear, perfume, and jewelry, displays a fantasy: a nude obese woman is considered beautiful (the title of the ad is Bella) and worthy of an artist’s careful work.

This ultimate image is not real. It can only be achieved artificially through the purchase of vast quantities of beauty products (Kilbourne 1989). The perfect provocateur is a mere façade. Even the models themselves do not look in the flesh as impeccable as they are depicted in ads. The classic image is constructed through cosmetics, photography, and airbrushing techniques.
Although the feminist movement challenged this “beauty myth” (Wolf 1991), the beauty industries (i.e., cosmetics, fashion, diet, and cosmetic surgery) countered with a multidimensional attack. First, they simply increased the number of commercial beauty images to which women are exposed. More than $1 million is spent every hour on cosmetics (figure 3.8). Most of that money is spent on advertising and packaging (Kilbourne 1989). Only eight cents of the cosmetics sales dollar goes to pay for ingredients; the rest goes to packaging, promotion, and marketing (Goldman 1987, 697).

Through advertising, the face becomes a mask (something you put on) (see figure 3.9) and the body becomes an object (see figure 3.10).

Women spend a huge amount of money on cosmetics because of the “structural realignments in gender relations, as women [assume] a more public identity than [has] been accorded them in the past” (Twitchell 1996, 149). This reinterpretation of the meaning of being female in the United States was signaled by suffrage, the birth control movement, the new conception of motherhood, and the development of new frameworks of opportunity for women beyond the confines of the home. It is only within the context of this fundamental change in the perception of the woman’s place—the conditional acceptance of the “New Woman”—that the cult of feminine beauty becomes comprehensible (Vinikas 1992, xv).

**Sexual Objectification, Eating Disorders, and the Waif Look**

Twenty years ago fashion models weighed 8% less than the average female. Today, models weigh 23% less than the average female.

—Jean Kilbourne

The . . . influence of pageant competitions on young women’s decisions about diet and lifestyle is . . . likely to have a strong . . . effect.

—S. Rubinstein and B. Caballero

What are the consequences of living in a society that sexually objectifies the body, especially the female body, through gaze or “checking out?” Advertisers are widely known
for sexually objectifying women. Figure 3.11, an ad for BMW, sexually objectifies women and sexual relationships between men and women. According to the ad, “the ultimate attraction” is the BMW. While women are still displayed as attractive to men, the auto is the “the ultimate attraction.” Obviously, placing a magazine photo of a flashy new car on a women’s face as you are having sexual intercourse with her is demeaning and degrading.

An ad for Axe deodorant body spray for men continues this theme of sexual objectification of women. The headline is a quote spoken by the provocateur in the ad: “I know six kama sutra positions where you can still face the tv.” She is speaking to her male sexual partner. It is similar to figure 3.11 in that both objectify the sexual relationships between men and women. While in the former, the man covers the woman’s face during sex, in the latter, the man is watching television during sex. Both are humiliating to women.

Although the social construction of gender is not fresh, this perspective has more recently been formalized in objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Accordingly, being raised in a culture that objectifies the female body and sexualizes women leads them to internalize this objectification. This is called self-objectification. Such self-consciousness is characterized by habitual self-monitoring of one’s physical appearance. Consciousness of one’s body as an object has three components: body surveillance, internalization of cultural body standards, and beliefs about the controllability of appearance (McKinley and Hyde 1996).

Internalizing cultural standards of feminine beauty leads to increased shame and anxiety about the body and appearance, partly because societal images of idyllic beauty are virtually impossible to achieve. Moreover, continuous monitoring of one’s physical appearance leaves fewer perceptual resources available for attending to inner body experience and results in a decreased awareness of internal body states. Self-objectification is hypothesized to be related to increased risk of psychological problems, including eating disorders, bipolar depression, and sexual dysfunction.

Objectification theory has empirical support. Body objectification is related to body shame and this, in turn, to disordered eating in college women (McKinley 1999, McKinley and Hyde 1996, Noll and Fredrickson 1998, Fredrickson et al. 1998). Body shame is tentatively related to body esteem, which is, sequentially, related to several dimensions of psychological well-being, including autonomy, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance (McKinley 1999).

One way to help girls and women resist the internalization of a passive, object-oriented sense of self may be to encourage sports participation and related forms of physical activity and risk-taking, thus promoting a more active, instrumental experience of the self (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). However, participation in more “feminine” sports (those focusing more on female appearance) and/or physical activity is associated with higher body shame, indicating greater internalization of cultural standards of feminine
beauty (Parsons and Betz 2001). Physical activity is also consistently related to both instrumentality (an assertive, self-determining, self-reliant approach to the environment) and internal locus of control (ability to view oneself as able to affect one's environment and one's fate to cope adaptively with stressful life experiences [Lefcourt 1991]).

In a study comparing former dancers and nondancers, Tiggemann and Slater (2001) found that former dancers scored higher on self-objectification, self-surveillance, and disordered eating. Self-objectification is a relatively long-term way of perceiving oneself. Even though former dancers are no longer exposed to a situation virtually requiring self-objectification, they still view themselves this way. The case studies in this section also support the notion that objectifying situations experienced at a young age may lead to the development of an enduring way of self-perception and worldview.

The rigorous physique standards demanded of fashion models and beauty pageant queens are extreme and often result in considerable weight loss and undernourishment. Using the heights and weights from most of the winners in the history of the Miss America Pageant, Rubinstein and Caballero (2000) constructed a Body Mass Index (BMI = weight divided by height squared) and found that many were undernourished. BMI has generally decreased over the years. In the 1920s, contestants had BMIs in the range now considered normal. But an increasing number of winners since then have had BMIs indicating undernourishment by standards set by the World Health Organization. In order to combat undernourishment and anorexia, pageant officials could use an eligibility requirement for a minimum body-fat percentage set by public health officials for all contestants.

The oppressive and draconian images of the ideal or perfect woman (see Andelin 1963) are hammered nearly continuously into countless little girls, adolescents, and women by the unrealistic representations in advertising. Advertising encourages not only fat-free diets but liposuction, anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and cosmetic surgery and dentistry. Who gains by promoting this nonsensical image of the ideal woman? Cosmetic surgery is a $300 billion industry (Twitchell 1996). The diet industry rakes in $33 million per year; cosmetics, $20 billion.

Advertising is not a new type of lie. Today’s women with ultrathin figures or breast implants are merely the contemporary version of females over the centuries who have mangled themselves in the name of feminine sex appeal. Feminist theories that portray women only as helpless victims of conspiracy plots are not accurate:

The idea that women are so utterly victimized by the way they are portrayed in magazines that they starve themselves and become sick has a certain alluring simplicity. . . . But anorexia and bulimia are multifactoral disorders more attributable to biology, environment, and personality than to the appearance of scrawny models in Diet Coke ads. This is not to deny the sexist nature of much of the media, or the reflective and aspirational nature of images cast in that media, but only to deny that conspiracy is the explanation. (Twitchell 1996, 154)

More important than increasing the number of advertisements, the beauty industries revised the perfect provocateur so that it would be more arduous than ever for women to imitate, creating the anorexic-looking waif model (see figures 3.12a and 3.12b) (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991). This can only increase the anxiety that many girls and women feel about their own appearance. Advertising images simultaneously tried to co-opt and commodify the very notion of “women’s liberation.”

Jean Kilbourne, in her video Slim Hopes, offers an in-depth analysis of the role that female bodies play in advertising imagery and the resulting devastating effects on women’s
health. There is a clear relationship between these representations and girls’ and women’s obsession with dieting and thinness (figure 3.13). The following three case studies of young women aptly illustrate the strong connection between media images of feminine beauty and life-threatening eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

Case One: Megan

I didn’t always hate my body. I thought I was doing so well, deflecting all the painful things that happened to me growing up, when all the while I was absorbing them. Each hurt pressed down, so deep inside I didn’t know I was carrying them everywhere I went—a time bomb.

The women in my family bought into cultural standards of beauty so much that they felt they needed to save me from the fate of being overweight (size 14). I fought it for years, trying to ignore the comments and criticism from my family and the images in movies, magazines, and TV of the ideal woman’s figure. After I entered college, I was diagnosed with anorexia and then bulimia. When I was anorexic I just refused to eat and lost so much weight that suddenly my family and acquaintances were so complimentary that I wasn’t satisfied with my weight loss, but I was sick of starving, sick of being obsessed with the food I wouldn’t allow myself to have.

My cousin taught me how to binge and purge so I switched to bulimia. I’m thirty-two years old now, and although I went through treatment for my eating disorders I know my recovery will never end. I have fought this battle for over eleven years now with varying success. I am currently in a relapse and meet the clinical diagnosis for bulimia [binging and purging three times per week or more, according to the DSM-4, an index used by psychologists and psychiatrists to diagnose bulimia].

When I was in elementary school I took a test called the Peabody Picture Analysis [a test of cognitive reasoning and verbal ability]. I was shown a picture and had to describe what was happening and why. I scored higher than anyone else in the history of the school—according to my mother. Over the years I utilized this ability by rationalizing and explaining away every bad thing that happened to me.

My father left when I was five and didn’t keep in contact because he was too young and
immature for the responsibility of a child. My grandmother was hard on me because she wanted me to develop to the best of my abilities. My mother moved out of state when I was a junior in high school to pursue a career because she had missed out on her childhood by having me, leaving me to live with my grandmother. I had an answer for everything.

All through junior high I was pretty happy with my body. When my grandmother offered me breast enlargement for a graduation present from high school (which I had never requested) I declined, and when I left for college, I felt free and full of hope. My struggle with my body image surfaced my freshman year. I had always been a size 12, but I gained the freshman fifteen and my weight kept creeping up.

When I went home for breaks, I noticed my mother and grandmother staring at me. They tried to throw money at the problem, trying to find clothes that would make me look smaller, better. The shopping expeditions were all failures. I looked fat in everything I tried. Then they began urging me to lose weight. I was uncomfortable but accustomed to hearing about this; I always kept silent until they finished and moved on to something else.

One time was different. My grandmother said, “Honey, I know you don’t want to hear this, but you have gotten so big. Don’t you know how much it embarrasses the whole family?” I was devastated. I walked away and tried to let it go, but it worked on me. I was a size 14 at the time, hardly obese.

My grandmother took me to a diet doctor who prescribed speed but I hated the way it made me feel—headaches, shaky, and with an awful dry mouth. I threw the pills away. I felt powerless and angry. I concentrated my anger on my body, which I felt had betrayed me. I wasn’t strong enough to stand up to my family and their influence when they hurt me. Instead, the anger I couldn’t express to them was unleashed on myself. It was so intense it allowed me to starve myself, to throw up what I did eat, to tell myself that I was ugly and undeserving of love and approval.

As the weight started coming off I had some satisfaction, but it was never enough. I got back down to a size 12 but kept going, I looked to cultural influences such as media images of the ideal body. Media influences eventually convinced me I wasn’t worthy of unconditional love from my family and fueled my perfectionism about my appearance and the development of anorexia and bulimia.

By the time I got down to a size 2, I looked sick, but everyone was thrilled. (My family USED to say you can never be too rich, too thin, or too grammatically correct but that was before three of us developed eating disorders.) For two years my weight stayed the same and I didn’t seek treatment. Once again I thought I was in control.

I got married in 1995 and right after our honeymoon my husband joined the Coast Guard and left for boot camp. While I waited the eight weeks he was gone, I dreamed about how exciting it would be to get his orders and move. My husband was stationed on a 270-foot cruiser. I was a little worried but figured I would adjust. I was terribly wrong. The only person I knew in the state was gone two months, back, then gone again. Newly married, I wanted so much to be with him, and I was crushed each time he left. The only person who I felt loved me unconditionally was forced to abandon me over and over again. Because my father left when I was little, my husband’s leaving was tearing old wounds open, wounds I had refused to even acknowledge.

Each time my husband had to leave, I would tell myself it would be different, that I would be able to handle it. Going to the ship to say goodbye tore my heart out. We would arrive at the ship and sit with the other couples and families saying their goodbyes. I would lean against him and hold his hand, trying to absorb as much as I could before they got under way, his smell, the way his arm felt around my shoulders. The further that
ship got away from port the blacker I felt inside. The pain went so deep I didn’t know how to express it. It was so much bigger than I was. I stopped eating; there was no reason to eat. The one thing I wanted was out of my reach. Each time the cycle repeated itself I got weaker and more depressed.

I had met some people, of course, but no one I trusted to tell such terrible things. My family knew I was lonely, but no one likes to hear bad news all the time, and I never told them how desperate my situation was. I held everything inside. My only comfort was my little dog, Nikki. I would hold him and cry and cry, knowing he would never judge me or think I was crazy. I did terrible things to my body, anything to take my mind off the pain: starving, throwing up, exercising, and cutting.

As much as I hated the Coast Guard, it was the Coast Guard that made it possible to get well. I went to the base clinic with a cold and the nurse practitioner knew something was wrong when she saw me. When she asked what was going on I told her. I am so thankful that she was there. I could tell she cared; it wasn’t just a job to her. She didn’t make me feel like a freak, and I will always be grateful for that. If she had, I wouldn’t have sought treatment or had the courage to work to get better. Everyone at that base clinic was wonderful: the pharmacist who looked out for me, the cute young medic who ostensibly accepted my lame excuse about my cat scratching my arm, the physician’s assistant who always encouraged me. They restored my faith in the military and myself.

I entered intensive outpatient treatment for my eating disorder, group and individual therapy, and it was draining. It’s the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. I had to face all the things I had refused to acknowledge for years. There were so many rules, no talking about weight, no talking about food and diets, not looking at the scales when they weighed us. Eating the group meal every Wednesday was the most difficult part. Being forced to eat a balanced meal seemed like too much food. We were all so in the disease. Every meal was a struggle, and the mood in that room was dark, you would have thought we were going to be lined up and shot afterwards, all ten people facing their deepest fears at each meal. I used to get mad that alcoholics could stay away from alcohol, but we didn’t have that luxury. We had to face our addiction three times a day or more.

It took me a long time to get better and it is an ongoing process. I have never cut myself again, and I don’t throw up much anymore, although I still do it. In fact, I did it this week. I walked into a restaurant’s bathroom and saw something chilling. Someone left a knife in the stall, and I knew just what she had used it for. I grieved for that person, whoever she was: a young girl trying so hard to be accepted, a woman trying to fit an impossible standard, we were connected. I thought about her concealing that knife, walking as quickly as she could, wondering if anyone noticed, desperate to get rid of the shame inside. I wish her love, acceptance, healing, and hope, all the things I wish for myself.

I am not trying to be dramatic when I say it is a daily struggle, and one I am currently losing. I wish I could just be happy with my body, but when I see idealized media images, or even very thin girls on campus, I find myself wanting. I want to look like that.

Case Two: Lori

I did not have to eat. Food was not nutrition; it was the enemy.

Holding out, pushing away, turning from desire was a main part of my eating disorder. There was a strong connection between self-control and anorexia nervosa. It was a form of power that I controlled over my eating habits. Second semester of freshman year in college, I felt so confused. It was at this time that everything seemed upside down in my life. I
turned to the restraint of food to create something that I could hold stable. This was my grip for support, and I turned to the control of my body. By dominating over this one factor of restraint, my feet seemed to stay on the ground for a short while.

I did not have to eat. I would not let other girls see me eat. I could pretend I wasn’t hungry. I would make my body do what I wanted it to do, not what it was supposed to do. Food was not nutrition; it was the enemy. I taught myself to hold out for long amounts of time. It took a while for my appetite to decrease, but my body slowly learned. I would ask myself how I would rather feel in an hour after I ate: full with an increased size in my belly, or would I rather feel hungry and eventually lose the weight? In my mind, I somehow viewed emptiness and happiness in a parallel world.

Right before I left school for summer vacation at the end of my freshman year was when people first started to notice that I looked different. People were saying I looked good. I started getting more people to pay attention to me and I received more compliments. When I came home for summer vacation, I weighed 120 pounds and was still losing weight. That may not seem like anything to worry about, but it was because of my height and bone structure. I’m a naturally tall and slender person, 5 feet 11 inches tall, and my normal weight was 135. I was dropping fast.

My mom remembered how I had gained weight during my first semester at college, so she assumed that I had just lost the pounds I had previously put on. She told me that I looked good, and so did my dad. I remembered how upset I was when my dad told me I looked fat when he came to visit for parents weekend. He thought it was funny. I was ashamed and shocked. So, when he saw me the next time, and told me that I looked beautiful, I felt a feeling of acceptance.

My friends, on the other hand, were worried. They watched me eat, told me I was too skinny, and would yell at me. One of them actually told me that I looked disgusting and I had to stop doing this to myself. Then my boyfriend became involved. He was pressured by my friends to tell me that I needed to start eating. So he would take me to dinner and lunch and yell at me to finish my meal. I never did. The strange thing is that he would also begin to tell me how good my body looked, and how I looked perfect. That just fueled my desire to keep doing this to myself.

It is obvious that society pursues the notion that self-control is a virtue, and a lean body is good evidence of self-control. Psychiatrists told me that depression originated my eating disorder, yet to this day I am still unsure whether my eating disorder caused my depression or vice versa. After these biweekly visits to counselors and psychiatrists, I could then see that an anorexic person’s resistance to eat displays a distorted form of self-control. Restrained eating was never about the immediate results; it was about the delayed feeling of an empty stomach and smaller waistline, which never got small enough in my eyes. I never thought about the impact on my body until the weight started decreasing at rapid rates. I had trouble seeing the good form of self-control like creating a long, healthy life by putting vital nutrients into my body. Fortunately, I eventually realized anorexia wasn’t a form of self-control; it was a lack of self-control.

Being skinny is an attention grabber, and it comes as a reinforcement to keep losing the weight. I am not going to lie and say that I did not gain attention from my smaller body. Guys commented by saying “You look good,” which actually motivated the obsession to lose weight. While girls, on the other hand, would put on their questioning faces and inquire, “How did you get that skinny?” pretending to not have any assumptions of my eating disorder. Their eyes would burn holes in my back as they watched me walk away, analyzing my body, whispering to their friends about how anorexic I look,
ironically followed by a comment about how fat they themselves are. The positive attention from males and jealous attention from females, were just reinforcement to keep losing the weight.

I assumed that choosing not to eat would make me feel good about myself in the long run. Little did I know, was that the disease increased a horrible feeling of weakness not long after the positive short-term feeling. In other words, long-term effects were not taken into consideration. I kept thinking about the time when I felt powerful. On the contrary, the long-term effects inhibited the ability to lead a well-rounded life. I was physically weak, my motivation was lost, and my mind started to play tricks with my body. Yet instead of gaining some amount of control or reward, I felt myself losing what I yearned for so badly—to be happy.

Before I experienced anorexia, I would always question infected girls and their actions. If their eating disorder seemed obvious to me, I would wonder how they could hold off eating for so long. It seemed to be a challenge of willpower, and as twisted as it is, I decided to take on this challenge. When in reality, it was not a goal at all. It was a weakness that I fell for. It is a disorder that so many young women, and now men, become slaves to and eventually regret.

**Case Three: Jodi**

I was 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 72 pounds.

I began dieting at the age of thirteen when I weighed 115 pounds. I was made fun of by family and friends for being chunky. For two years I restricted my food intake. My parents became worried about my eating behavior. . . . At first, I was encouraged by dieting; as time went by, I was able to suppress hunger pains by keeping my goal of losing weight in mind. As I grew older, I felt eating was the only thing I could control. . . . After a year of losing weight, my parents took me to the doctor. He was worried and put me on a high-calorie diet. I avoided this by lying about what I ate, or flushing food down the toilet. When I did eat, it made me sick. I felt guilty and would throw it up. At one point, I was consuming only 500 calories a day. When I got down to 72 pounds, I was placed in the hospital and fed by a tube. Today I’m sixteen years old and weigh 108 pounds. Now I’m able to look in the mirror and not be disgusted by thinking I’m fat. But I still sometimes struggle with eating and always watch what I eat.

A common theme weaving alarmingly through these three case studies is that cultural stress on young women produces an unrealistic standard of feminine beauty.

Advertising gives us a constant stream of representations of perfect—and, of course, unattainable—female beauty. The “waif look,” epitomized by ultrathin supermodel Kate Moss, has colonized the dreams of young girls. However, the failure to attain such an unrealistic look has been more like a nightmare than a dream for girls who consider the waif look the only valid form of female identity.

**Men and Eating Disorders**

When one tries to conjure up an image of the stereotypical victim of an eating disorder, she seems to be a young white woman from an affluent family. It is a myth that males are not affected by eating disorders. Although disordered eating is less common for boys and men than girls and women, when it does strike, males suffer just as much as females (Henry, 2006).
Are males less vulnerable to eating disorders than women? Or do they simply seek treatment less than women? Males are under similar stress as women to obtain a specific body type (see section on “Muscularity as Masculinity,” this chapter). Although historically cultural mores have constrained and dictated physical appearance for women much more than for men, the demand on men has, of late, become increasingly harsh. Males are being hospitalized for eating disorders in record numbers (Henry, 2006). They display the same symptoms and behaviors and emit the same feelings as females with eating disorders.

Men with eating disorders are less likely to accept, acknowledge, and seek treatment because our society views them as a health issue for women. It is obvious that the medical profession shares this view considering treatment is geared specifically for females. Nevertheless, the incidence and severity of males with eating disorders is on the increase. It is important to develop gender-specific treatment since the socio-cultural issues and physical symptoms are different for males and females.

In conclusion, it is clear that both males and females with disordered eating need medical treatment.

Breaking Stereotypes, Expanding the Boundaries of Beauty

By questioning the accepted definition of beauty, we hope to help women change the way they perceive their bodies and encourage them to feel beautiful every day.

—Silvia Lagnado, senior vice president, Dove

Dove introduced its Campaign for Real Beauty in September 2004 with a much-talked-about ad campaign featuring women whose physical appearances are outside the stereotypical norms of beauty. Dove’s commitment to inspiring positive self-image among women has extended to initiatives that support a wider definition of beauty. For example, Uniquely ME!, a program developed by Dove and the Girl Scouts of the USA, helped foster self-esteem among girls ages 8 to 17.

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, a form of institutional advertising, is breaking stereotypes and attempting to widen cultural standards of beauty. More than two-thirds of women globally believe that the media and advertising set an unrealistic standard of beauty that most women cannot ever achieve. More than half of all women are disgusted by their bodies. Unfortunately, only 13 percent of women are very satisfied with their body weight and shape. Perhaps more important, only 2 percent of women around the world consider themselves beautiful.

Dove, a global beauty brand, launched their national advertising campaign starring real women with real bodies and real curves vis-à-vis anorexic-looking supermodels. The campaign aims to make more women feel beautiful everyday—celebrating diversity and real women by challenging contemporary stereotypical views of beauty.

In one spot for Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, six courageous women—two students, a kindergarten teacher, a manicurist, an administrative assistant, and a café barista—posed for the photo, wearing nothing but underwear and their sassy attitude. These images have not been altered or retouched in any way. The implication is body image self-acceptance.

The Dove global Campaign for Real Beauty attempts to provoke discussion and encourage debate about the nature of feminine beauty. Dove hopes to alter the way women perceive their bodies, and their beauty, by widening the definition of what it means to be beautiful. The campaign uses images of real women with real bodies and real curves
to accomplish this goal. Dove’s latest ads support the introduction of its new firming collection products.

In most media images of women there is a very narrow vision of feminine beauty. A few carefully chosen icons of attractiveness have unusually and unrealistically beautiful features and stunning proportions. However, when only a tiny portion of women is satisfied with their body image and shape in a society enamored by diet and makeover programs, it is not surprising to see low self-esteem and eating disorders.

In conclusion, the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is a global effort intended to serve as a starting point for social change and act as a catalyst for widening the definition and discussion of beauty. Employing various communication vehicles—advertising, www.campaignforealbeauty.com, interactive billboards, panel discussions, and a Self-Esteem Fund—the campaign invites women to join in the discussion about beauty and share their views of it with women around the world. The Campaign for Real Beauty supports the Dove mission: to make women feel more beautiful every day by challenging today’s stereotypical view of beauty and inspiring women to take better care of themselves.

Barbie Makeover

The well-known toy manufacturer Mattel has given Barbie, its curvaceous, best-selling doll, a major makeover. Barbie has been an icon for young girls since her birth in 1959. In fact, a woman in Great Britain has undergone numerous cosmetic surgeries on her face and body in order to emulate Barbie. Barbie’s unrealistic shape has rankled feminists. Just how unrealistic is she? If Barbie were to be blown up to lifelike proportions, her measurements would be 38-18-34. The makeover has given her a more realistic figure. The new Barbie has slimmer hips, a thicker waist, and a smaller bust. She also has a new nose, softer, straighter hair, and a more youthful face with less makeup. However, the changes have not come without problems. She has already lost her waitressing job at Hooters and her boyfriend, Ken, has told her that he wants to start seeing other dolls.

Muscularity as Masculinity

This omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance.

—Jean Baudrillard, America

To be sure, there has been a lot of recent attention on the effect waifish models and actresses can have on girls and women. Nevertheless, men can also suffer from body image problems (Schooler and Ward 2006). Media images of muscular and vascular yet thin men in advertising—on billboards and in magazines—resemble the mythical Adonis—handsome, chiseled, smooth, well groomed, healthy looking and a hairless body. How do these images affect those who strive to emulate this look yet fall short of the flawless standard?

Body image is a demanding concern for men as well as women. Advertising and other media images can have adverse effects on self-esteem in boys and young men. Past research on dangerous eating disorders that can stem from body-related emotional issues has understandably focused primarily on women. When researchers have examined men,
assumptions and analyses have been misguided. Men are not that concerned with weight and pants size. Instead they are more concerned about personal hygiene such as sweat, body hair, and body odor.

The more media young men consumed, especially music videos and prime-time TV, the worse they feel about personal hygiene aspects of their bodies (Schooler and Ward, 2006). Additionally, such negative feelings impact their sexual well-being, in some instances leading to more aggressive and risky sexual behavior. Is it unhealthy for average young men to aspire to the lean, muscular body idealized throughout Western civilization from ancient Greece to Michelangelo to Calvin Klein to Versace to Abercrombie and Fitch? Not necessarily—unless it becomes an obsession.

There are positives and negatives. Since the male provocateur image is the picture of health, this is a positive aspect of modeling effects of such images. Clearly, much more of the American population is overweight—indeed even obese—than underweight. The skyrocketing incidence of diabetes in the past several generations signals the unhealthy affects of overeating and not exercising. Considering the combination of the adverse effects of heart disease and diabetes on health, Americans are literally eating themselves to death. Clearly, it is advantageous to the health of most Americans to lose weight and become leaner.

There has been plenty of role models with healthy and realistic bodies that have adorned magazine covers: John Kennedy Jr., Wesley Snipes, George Clooney, Matt Damon, Tom Cruise, Hugh Jackman, to cite just a few. In fact, the male provocateur seems to have two simultaneous or perhaps rotating images: the rugged, rough-around-the-edges look vs. the smooth sleek look, the bad guy vs. the good guy, the cowboy vs. the metrosexual, the Marlboro Man or the clean-cut California surfer boy, the thug vs. the GQ man, the rough blue-collar guy vs. the suave white-collar professional.

Although body image may be a more personal or private issue for men than women, it is clear that today’s man has become more concerned about—and perhaps self-accepting of—his physical appearance than in previous generations. A key factor in mental health is appreciation and acceptance of one’s body size and shape.

Body-image issues seem to be more delicate, complicated, and emotionally fraught for women than men. For boys and men, these concerns are optional. If a man has a deteriorating body image, he may still be able to garner respect and prestige from his wealth or high occupational status. Generally, for a woman, physical appearance is much more important than her status or achievements. For a girl or young woman, brains or skill cannot compensate for a less than attractive body (Tolman, 2005). There is a double standard in our society. While females are constrained to look a particular way, males do not have that parallel requirement.

Baudrillard (1990) states that only women are seducers, but empirical evidence on advertising suggests otherwise. Men, too, are seducers—a male version of the perfect provocateur. The ideal man in ads is young, handsome, clean-cut, perfect, and sexually alluring. Today’s man has pumped his pecs and shoulders and exhibits well-defined abs (see figures 3.14 and 3.15). He has tossed away his stuffy suit and has become a most potent provocateur.
Not many years ago, the slick and refined look defined fashion’s ideal man (figure 3.16). Now the muscular guy dominates the runways and magazine pages. The male provocateur is the image of the perfect athletic physique (figure 3.17). He is the most recent model of manhood to appear in advertisements, films, musical artists, and fashion. Even in children’s action figures, the muscular, athletic look has replaced the moderately lean figure. One only needs to compare the G.I. Joe of the early 1980s to the well-defined and brawny superhero action figures of today to see this pattern.

This contemporary warrior has become chic—not accidentally—as fashion has discovered a fresh male lead in the blue-collar man. Fashion photographers help create and capture this ultramasculine image. In fact, 90 percent of male models are working class—rough around the edges and beefy, not as frail, thin, or chiseled as their predecessors.

The new ideal look displays muscularity, athleticism, and a blue-collar background. Some musical artists regularly do strength and aerobic training to maintain a lean, muscular physique and endurance for performing. Shirtlessness is part of a trend that corresponds to the rise of the beefy male model (figure 3.18). Designers have embraced the garb of the blue-collar man. For example, Italian designers have presented European blue-collar industrial boots, sweaters, and overcoats. In the same vein are the bold fashions of the late Gianni Versace, who pioneered a tight tank top or vest over the exposed chest.

This ultramasculine look from Italy and other parts of Europe has immigrated to the United States. It has been successfully marketed in stores such as the Gap, Banana Republic, and Old Navy that primarily sell cotton clothing. Out went the preppy look and
in came lumberjack plaid and denim shirts and lug-sole shoes. The blue-collar man’s wardrobe became mainstream fashion.

The male provocateur has become a symbol of our times. The rise of the blue-collar man has stimulated a return to an emphasis on a muscular, athletic body build. Advertising agencies and fashion photographers have seized the ultramasculine look, marketed it, and propelled its success in popular culture.

The beefy, muscular look has found a receptive audience in everything from beer commercials to clothing ads. It may have evolved as a need to compensate for the widespread violence in postmodern society. An overdeveloped body has traditionally been viewed as a sign of vanity (Morris 1996). Now men (and women) may be bodybuilding to produce a strong physical image or give the illusion of invincibility in hopes of being less vulnerable to random acts of violence. A strong physical image may compensate for a lack of economic security and control over one’s work. (This is discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.) In other words, a physically powerful look validates masculine identity and provides a dominating image for safety and protection.

The increased popularity of bodybuilding has been associated with male insecurity (Klein 1993). There is an interesting parallel between the anorexic waif look in females and the muscular and athletic look in males. At the extreme of both is obsessive-compulsive behavior, which is believed to be due to a chemical imbalance in individuals. In addition to this biological chemical imbalance, cultural, gender, and subcultural forces guide and shape individuals as part of the processes of socialization and acculturation.

In females, obsessive-compulsive behavior may result in anorexia nervosa, in which girls and women starve themselves in an attempt to reach unrealistic cultural standards of feminine beauty. Similarly, in obsessive-compulsive men we may see a condition called muscle dysmorphia. These men are obsessed with achieving an unrealistic cultural standard of muscularity as masculinity. Like the anorexic who sees herself as fat and unattractive despite her emaciated appearance the man suffering from muscle dysmorphia sees himself as scrawny and inadequate despite his bulging muscles. Many of these men have made lifting weights the most important activity in their lives, at the expense of family, relationships, and career.

Anorexia nervosa in women and muscle dysmorphia in men are sad reminders of the debilitating dysfunctions of gender roles in postmodern society. In contemporary culture, muscles reflect more than merely men’s functional ability to perform heavy labor or defend themselves, their loved ones, and their private property. Muscles are waymarks that distinguish men from each other as well as from women (except for female athletes and bodybuilders).

The discussion of muscles as a sign of power involves not only working-class men but also middle- and upper-class males (Katz 1995). Muscularity and strength are highly valued within the male sports subculture by men of all races and social classes. Muscularity as masculinity is a motif in ads that target upper-income men as well as those on the lower range of social stratification. Advertisers often use representations of physically rugged or muscular male bodies to masculinize goods and services aimed at elite male consumers.

Bodybuilding may be men’s reaction to compensate for an increase in women’s economic, political, and social power. It is the intimidation factor. If men can no longer dominate women economically, politically, and socially, they are developing their bodies to be even bigger and stronger than women’s. Men are reconceptualizing their images as
they lose control or influence over the wives, girlfriends, mothers, sisters, and secretaries who used to purchase most of their clothes. Now men are designing an image for themselves. There appear to be two key points. First is a strong interest in clothing styles. Second is the beefy image, a type of exhibitionism. The provocateur exhibits himself either by showing his body or by displaying his fashion sense.

Beefy male models understand that they have a look that is currently very marketable. Sexual allure sells everything from cars, clothing, calendars, and cologne to music. After years of depicting women as sex objects and troubled bimbos, advertising is applying those stereotypes to men (Foote 1988). Contrary to Baudrillard’s (1990) contention, it is clear that advertising also portrays men as provocateurs or seducers.

As part of my research on advertising, I immersed myself in the acting and modeling industry. I modeled on runways and in print media (e.g., the nacho maker in the ad shown in figure 4.8a), played minor roles on several television series and commercials, and was a stand-in for a CEO in another commercial. Despite an emphasis on muscularity, thinness is still demanded of male models. The norm for fashion runway models is a very narrow range: six feet to six feet two inches in height and approximately 160 to 170 pounds. My agent, a former model of Asian descent, stood six feet tall and weighed only 160 pounds. He was so thin that he covertly wore thigh pads in his trousers to simulate muscular quadriceps.

Now in postmodern advertising, it is the man’s turn to be the sex object—stripped and moist, promoting everything from underwear to women’s fashion (figure 3.19). Feminist theory and the women’s movement have made it politically incorrect to portray women as potent provocateurs or desperate dullards. Public consciousness has raised awareness in advertising of how women can be delineated. The insertion of men into these traditional roles is good business.

The most noticeable archetypes of the male provocateur are in advertising. Men are depicted in ads as incompetent and sometimes as objects of ridicule (figure 3.20), rejection, anger, and violence. Predictably, men’s-rights activists have protested the use of these types of images for commercial exploitation. The image of men as incompetent fathers, unfortunately, is consistent with the way men actually have been treated in divorce courts and child custody hearings.

Consumer surveys (Langer, in Foote 1988) have shown that some women simply delight in seeing foolish men in
ads and commercials. The portrayal of men as foolish and incompetent has possible connections with general cultural presuppositions about men and women (Elliott and Wootton 1997). This is a better explanation for the images than conspiracy theories that claim that it is female ad execs retaliating for decades of ads that exploited females as sex objects. Typically, women, as an aggregate, are not yet in power positions as advertisers or clients to determine such marketing strategy.

Advertising images of women from sexpots to airheads not only sold brand products and services but also helped to shape social attitudes on relationships and on the roles and status accorded to women. It follows that these images of men confirmed that some women increasingly view men as sex objects, jerks, or nerds. Yet if women were the target audiences for such ads, it made them seem malicious, indignant, and unjust. Advertisers realized that they had gone too far and toned down the male image from the blatant sex object to a more affectionate view (see figure 3.21).

Men appear to have a mixed reaction to the provocateur image, which is a definite change from the old-fashioned protector and provider images. In fact, partial nudity within a romanticized context of fatherhood has become a convincing marketing device. The hunky dad image (figures 3.22–3.24)—especially the semi-nude hunky dad (figure 3.25)—has been cited as among the most positive portrayals of men
in advertising (Foote 1988). Men also have reacted favorably to images of vulnerability (figure 3.26). However, they seem to be most annoyed by the kitchen-klutz syndrome.

How long will the beefy look be hot? It has thrived for twenty years in a rapidly changing industry. Advertisers must shock us, it seems, to get our attention. We have become numb to their shock tactics. That is why postmodern advertising has sacrificed even its sacred brand logos to get our attention. Images of hunky but sensitive men cause us to pay attention. The postfeminist male in postmodern advertising (figures 3.27 and 3.28) hauntingly reminds us of the prefeminist female in modern advertising.

The Intrinsic Defect

The promise of the commercial is not just “You will have pleasure if you buy our product,” but also (and perhaps more important), “You will be happy because people will envy you if you have this product.” The spectator of the commercial imagines herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others—an envy which will justify her loving herself. The commercial images steal her love of herself as she is, and offer it back to her for the price of the product.

—John Berger

To be successful, an ad must be persuasive on two levels. First, it should raise your anxiety level. It should persuade you that you need something; it should make you feel guilty, inferior, or somehow “less than.” Second, an ad must provide the solution. If an ad captures you on both these levels, you are generally hooked.

Advertisers are constantly bombarding consumers, especially women, with the message that they are inherently flawed (see figures 3.29 and 3.30)—that what they are or what they have is not enough, too much, or not good enough.
(Kilbourne 1989). The ad in figure 3.30, for example, says, “Introducing the eyes you wish you had been born with.” Women need change—specifically, eliminating what is wrong with them. There is an assumption, often explicit, that there is something wrong with their physical appearance, dress, or body odor. “Where did such widespread affictions as body odor, halitosis, iron poor blood, gray hair, water spots, vaginal odor, dish pan hands, various small glands and muscles, and split ends come from?” (Twitchell 1996, 32).

Advertisers have cleverly poked fun at the way their own industry portrays women as needing substantial physical changes. The Michelob Light ad in figure 3.31 balances a group of exhortations to self-improvement with “Relax. You’re OK. Improve your beer.” This use of self-deprecation has been highly successful and has also come to characterize postmodern advertising, which no longer tries to come across as authoritative.

Ads also sometimes portray men as inherently flawed. There is plenty of room for improvement for men as well as women, the ads say. But advertisers don’t seem to be as hard on men as they are on women. Nevertheless, ads target men’s physical prowess in two areas especially, stressing a lean and muscular body (figure 3.32) and a healthy, thick head of hair (figure 3.33), without any gray, of course.

The Child as Sex Object

Sexual images in media hurt young girls. Unavoidable mass media images of sexually objectified girls (and women displayed as adolescents) can cause psychological and physical harm to adolescents and young women. The pressure to conform to the provocateur image can result in depression, eating disorders, and poor academic performance. The sexual objectification of girls is pervasive and an increasing problem damaging to girls. The problem occurs when society’s sexual objectification of women becomes internalized by young adolescents and girls.
Some examples include adult women dressed as schoolgirls in music videos, bikini-clad young women in hot tubs, and sexually charged print advertisements and television commercial featuring teenage girls.

A few popular artists whose lyrics and music videos sexually objectify women are the Pussycat Dolls, Kid Rock, and 50 Cent, emphasizing lyrics that suggest sexually objectified women.

These ubiquitous images, on television and the Internet, in movies and magazines, can also negatively affect young girls’ sexual development. Young adolescents and girls are especially vulnerable since they are developing their sense of self.

School performance can also deteriorate. In one experiment, college-aged men and women were asked to put on either a swimsuit or a sweater. They wore the garment for ten minutes while taking a math quiz. The young women in swimsuits performed significantly worse than those wearing sweaters. No significant differences were found for young men.

The results of this study certainly resonate with a growing wave of public concern about the impact of highly sexed imagery. For example, in 2006, public authorities in Madrid banned underweight and underage models from catwalks. This has reverberated throughout the fashion world. The Italian government and two top fashion associations followed this lead, enforcing a new code of ethics in December, 2006, after top Brazilian fashion model Ana Carolina Reston died of heart failure after weighing only 88 pounds. In France, Health Minister Xavier Bertrand, worried about the rise of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, asked a panel of experts to create a similar voluntary code for advertisers and clothing designers on how the female body should be portrayed.

The sexual objectification of women is especially notorious in advertising; within advertising, beer commercials are particularly notorious offenders. Print ads are also guilty as evidenced by a series of Skechers shoe ads featuring pop singer Christina Aguilera. In each of the ads, Aguilera plays two characters: schoolgirl and teacher, nurse and patient, and police officer and perpetrator. The sexually objectified scantily dressed nurse was so offensive that it was banned because of protests and objections.

The popular Bratz dolls and television series (see Bratz.com) is aggressively marketed to young girls. The company’s slogan: “the only girls with a passion for fashion.” Their images feature girl dolls in bikinis, sitting in a hot tub, mixing drinks, while the ‘Boyz’ play guitars and posture with their surf boards. Some of the dolls come dressed in miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas.

With sexual objectified messages coming from the media, it seems obvious that parents should take a more active role in assisting the development of sexual self-image in their children. There is further need to for parents and concerned citizens to apply consumer pressure on manufacturers and advertisers.

There is a disturbing trend in advertising toward portraying children (figure 3.34), and sometimes even babies, as sex...
objects. These ads combine a semblance of innocence with a heavy dose of sexual desire to tug at the emotions of prospective consumers.

The young girl in the four ads shown in figures 3.35–3.38 appears to be about five years old. But she’s made up to look sexually mature. Note the serious facial expressions, the absence of clothing, the adult hairstyles and makeup, and body gestures and postures. These characteristics make the young model appear to be much older than she really is. In fact, in figure 3.38 she has the illusion of cleavage, created by body posture that creates a shadow in the cleavage area.

After the 1999 murder of JonBenet Ramsey, a six-year-old beauty pageant contestant who wore makeup and adult clothes, the sexualization of young girls became an issue of public debate within the United States. One need not look further than this as-yet-unsolved murder case in Boulder, Colorado, to see a tragic consequence of transforming young girls into cultural representations of feminine beauty and sexual attractiveness. The cover of Dallas Child shown in figure 3.39 poignantly brings out the suffering caused by exploitation, inhumane treatment, and coercion that are sometimes involved in beauty pageants for tots and young girls.

**Aggression, Violence, and Mass Media**

As a child, you see a Dirty Harry movie, where the heroic policeman is shooting people right and left. Even years later, the right kind of scene can trigger that script and suggest a way to behave that follows it.

—L. Rowell Huesmann

If an advertisement is to be successful, it must first grab our attention. But is no attention better than negative attention? It is for me. Take for example this image of a woman fastened with straps to a big red and white target (figure 3.40). In the foreground a man is throwing
knives around her. The headline states: “better be accurate.” The advertised product is a blood glucose meter for diabetics. This ad flirts with violence against women and is too obviously immaterial to the product being sold.

On March 4, 1998, two young white men, aged nineteen and twenty-two, were charged with capital murder in Texas for the torture killing of a nineteen-year-old mentally challenged woman, Amy Robinson. After offering the trusting young woman a ride to work in their car, they drove her to a field. They first tried to shoot Amy with a bow and arrow. When she ran from them, the men chased her down and shot her with pellet pistols. Amy was finished off with a .22-caliber-rifle shot to the head. In their confession to detectives, the young men simply said that they were in the “mood to kill.” One of the killers was recently convicted and sentenced to death.

Aggression is a learned behavior. Media violence teaches us aggression as children. Since aggression is learned, it is possible that it can be unlearned or, better yet, never taught in the first place. The mass media produce, reproduce, and distribute aggressive, violent, intimidating, or coercive “scripts,” cultural messages that teach us how to behave. This pattern of media violence, continuously repeated and often extreme, creates a cumulative effect that often numbs us to human suffering and brutality. Advertising legitimizes such violence and in doing so glamorizes a form of violent masculinity (see figures 3.41 and 3.42).

Sometimes a T-shirt reveals something about the person wearing it. But what happens when a shirt’s statement pushes the envelop on social acceptability? The Dallas-based company, CharroKing, sells shirts that walk the thin line between clever and offensive. Oak Cliff residents particularly respond to what the company’s Web site, www.charroking.com, calls the “original and controversial ‘Welcome to Oak Cliff’ T-shirt.” The shirt reads “Welcome to Oak Cliff” below a picture of one figure holding a gun and putting another figure in the trunk of a car.

While some people find the shirt inappropriate, others think it is funny. The shirt appears to reinforce and, in fact, glamorize violent masculinity. It seems to be inspired by the kidnapping and murder of an Oak Cliff restaurateur. Opposition to the company’s offensive shirts has had some success. CharroKing had a kiosk in a Dallas mall, but according to the company’s Web site, the business was closed due to complaints. First Amendment absolutists would argue that people have a right to sell and wear it because of our rights to free expression.

“Violence refers to immediate or chronic situations that result in injury to the psychological, social, or physical well-being of individuals or groups” (Katz 1995, 140). This
includes hitting, punching, kicking, beating, grabbing, pushing, slapping, raping, battering, sexually harassing, and threatening or trying to inflict injury with an object such as a gun, knife, or club. Interpersonal violence is “behavior by persons against persons that threatens, attempts, or completes intentional infliction of physical or psychological harm” (American Psychological Association 1993, 1).

Nearly all (90 percent) violent crime is committed by males (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992), most of them young. If we deconstruct gender roles in our society, we discern how cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity encourage violence or receptivity to it. Since gender roles are so pervasive and deeply ingrained in our psyche through cultural transmission, cultural patterns of gender interaction often seem to be taken for granted as natural and, consequently, unchangeable. These cultural images of masculinity and femininity have a great deal of power over us.

**Alcohol Use, Advertising, and Violence against Women**

The tragic abuse-affection cycle that many women are trapped in is too often glorified in advertising.

—Barbi White, *Media & Values* intern

First, I would like to acknowledge that some of my readers are victims of domestic and sexual abuse. Others are undoubtedly abusers. All of us have our personal histories and, perhaps, intense feelings about issues such as sexism, violence, and alcohol abuse.

Domestic and sexual violence against women is widespread. A nationwide survey of over four thousand women indicated that three out of four have been treated violently by men (Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994). Yet many of these women will never talk about being battered (see figure 3.43). In 1991 half of the incidents in which women were victimized involved physical violence by an intimate male partner (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992). One-fourth of all children will be sexually abused by an adult before they reach the age of eighteen (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992). Girls are typically abused by a male within the family, boys by males outside the family. Most of these sexual assaults are not committed by strangers. There is a strong correlation between domestic and sexual abuse and alcohol consumption (see Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994).

The cycle of domestic abuse has three stages: (1) tension, (2) abuse, and (3) repentance. If the cycle continues, repentance eventually dissipates and one of three events results: the abuser leaves, the victim leaves, or one of them is killed by the other. More women each year are killed or injured (badly enough to require emergency treatment) by their domestic partners than by car accidents (Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994).

Men who abuse their wives often grew up in environments where they saw their fathers abuse their mothers. Patterns of abuse are learned within the family. Scripting for the roles of both abuser and victim begins at an early age.
Violence is often intergenerational, as the ad in figure 3.44 points out: “Men who abuse their wives often grew up in homes where they saw their fathers abuse their mothers. What horrible shoes for a son to fill.” Children who grow up in violent homes are five times more likely to become batterers or victims themselves than are children from nonviolent homes (Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1990). Forty percent of all perpetrators of spousal violence are also violent with their children (Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994).

Half of all battered wives report that their husbands were drinking when they were abusive (Frieze and Noble 1980). Besides the direct role alcohol plays in violence against women, some alcohol advertising involves gender representations that reinforce, justify, or trivialize violence against women (Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994). Alcohol advertisers’ use of sex as the major marketing motif helps create a risky environment for both women and men.

**Date Rape**

The boys never meant any harm against the girls. They just meant to rape.

—Joyce Kithia, deputy principal of a Kenyan boarding school, commenting on a raid of a girls’ dormitory by a gang of boys who raped seventy-one girls and killed nineteen

A rape occurs more than once every minute in the United States (Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994). While there is no single cause of sexual and domestic violence, alcohol use is one factor linked to its incidence and with our social response to it. One out of four persons, including both men and women, reports having unwanted sexual activities as a result of alcohol consumption at least once within the past year (Berkowitz 1992; Perkins 1992). Approximately three out of four acquaintance rapes involve alcohol consumption on the part of the victim, the assailant, or both (Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski 1987; Norris and Cubbins 1992) (see figure 3.45).

Many male college students have said that they drink alcohol to loosen their sexual inhibitions and to experience a sense of power; one in twelve said they would rape if they could get away with it (Ben-
son, Charlton, and Goodhart 1992). Fifty-one percent of men in one study admitted to sexually assaulting a woman while in college (Berkowitz 1992; Muehlenhard and Linton 1987). Their typical modus operandi was simply to ignore the victim when she said no or otherwise protested.

People generally are less likely to believe that a rape has occurred when the assailant has been drinking than when he has not (Norris and Cubbins 1992). Moreover, victims of sexual assault receive less sympathy from juries if they were drinking alcohol in the same general time period in which the assault occurred. For example, three male students at St. John’s University were acquitted of sexually assaulting a young woman. Jurors found “inconsistencies” in the story of a woman who was forced to drink alcohol and then gang-raped. The jury had doubts about the men’s guilt (Goodman 1991). A student at the University of Richmond who was facing criminal prosecution for raping one of his classmates blamed the alcohol. His defense was that he was so drunk he couldn’t tell whether she was consenting or not (Eigen 1992).

Sometimes laws have been passed in an attempt to bypass or compensate for this jury prejudice against victims of sexual assault who had also been consuming alcohol. In Texas, for example, the penal codes state that people under the influence cannot legally consent to sex. This is likely to result in higher conviction rates for “date rapes.”

The copy in an ad for F. Scott’s Nightclub reads: “If your date won’t listen to reason, try a velvet hammer.” In other words, using alcohol to force one’s date into submission is perfectly acceptable. One can also visualize the dangerous image of hitting one’s date with a hammer.

The copy in the Bacardi Black ad (figure 3.46) reads: “The best of the night’s adventures are reserved for people with nothing planned.” If we combine copy and illustration, we get an ambush. The illustration is set outside, perhaps in a parking lot. There are only two characters, a man and a woman. The woman appears to be off balance. Her legs are clasped together at the knees but spread at the ankles. She is wearing high-heeled shoes. A man has just appeared in front of her. He appears to be balanced and in control. His leg is visible between hers.

This ad perpetuates at least three myths about sexual assaults: (1) they are generally unplanned; (2) they generally occur in dark alleys or parking lots; and (3) rapists are usually strangers. The truth is that most sexual assaults are planned; they often take place in the victim’s home; and they typically involve people who know each other (Consumers for Socially Responsible Advertising 1994).

**Television and Movie Violence**

We are awash in a tide of violent representation such as the world has never known, and the consequences are very troubling.

—George Gerbner
A television set is on in the average home in the United States seven hours a day. Before children start first grade, they have already spent more time watching television than they will spend in class in college. By the time a child graduates from high school, she or he will have seen eighteen thousand violent deaths on television. Children view approximately ten thousand acts of violence per year on television. Eighty-five percent of all movies contain violence, compared with 57 percent of all cable television shows and 44 percent of all broadcast television shows (NBC Evening News 1996).

In the United States there has long been concern about the social and psychological impact of increasing violence on television and in films, yet little has been done to slow its growth. The modeling effect perspective argues that viewing media violence teaches viewers to behave violently through imitation. Another perspective, the catalytic effect, maintains that if certain conditions are present, viewing violent media depictions may prompt real-life violence, but it is not a sufficient cause in and of itself (Curran and Renzetti 1996).

The V-chip, a relatively new technological marvel, has been proposed as a possible solution to the increasing violence on television. This innovation allows parents to monitor, screen, and censor what their children watch.

In the real world, women, ethnic minorities, and the elderly are disproportionately victimized. Abusers of credit cards are punished more severely than child abusers in our society. Eighty-four percent of all violent offenders see no pain or long-term effects of violence, and 73 percent go unpunished. White males in the prime of life pay the smallest price for violence, being most likely to kill with impunity. In 1992, 94.5 percent of black homicide victims were killed by black offenders (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992). Protest art has denounced black-on-black gang violence in Los Angeles.

In mainstream cultural images, whiteness is the norm vis-à-vis ethnic minority subcultures, which are excluded as out-groups. Whiteness is an invisible privilege, understood but not stated, unconscious but prevalent. Gender roles are complex, considering the diversity of life experience, worldview, social position, and individual identity. Concepts of masculinity and femininity are various, tempered by race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. The major cleavage is between the dominant white middle-class masculinity and the other, marginalized versions.

Despite all these differences, male roles in patriarchal cultures generally display a propensity for, attachment to, or identification with violence. Of course, Hollywood action adventure films supply a plethora of dominant masculine archetypal heroes, all of them violent. This breed of violent man emerged in the mid-1970s when white males faced increasing economic instability and dislocation due to a widespread recession, economic restructuring, and downsizing in the corporate world.

In addition, racial and gender preferences, through affirmative action policy, polarized white males vis-à-vis people of color and white women. White males began viewing their positions as challenged and themselves as victims. Big, muscular, violent men in the movies provided vicarious participation in “payback” for white men. Violence in films, like that in real life, is perpetrated overwhelmingly by males (Katz 1995). Males make up the majority of the audience for action films, as well as for violent sports such as football and hockey.

Structural transformation in postindustrial capitalism creates tensions in masculine roles (Brod 1987). The mass media tell us that men are supposed to be strong, aggressive, and in control of their work. Yet the dichotomy between mental and manual work prevents any man from attaining ideal masculinity. Moreover, men at various levels of employment are
affected by the winds of macroeconomic forces that shape job availability, security, and salary.

Insecure in their identities and dissatisfied with the lack of control over their work lives, men use cultural images of muscular bodies as instruments of power, dominance, and control to validate masculine identity. Especially for working-class males, who have less access to more abstract forms of masculinity-validating power (economic power, authority on the job), the physical display of power, often through violence, is a way of asserting masculinity.

Men across social class and ethnic lines may be insecure about their masculinity, vulnerable to structural market forces, and unable to reasonably challenge revisionist gender relations. Men nevertheless continue to have leverage over women in terms of physical size and strength. Since advertising legitimizes and reinforces existing power relations, images that equate masculinity with size, strength, and violence have become more common.

**Sexual Violence in Advertising**

Why is a little teasing about wife battering more objectionable than using conventional sexual images to stimulate conventional sexual appetites? Because it trivializes conduct that lacerates the bodies and psyches of unwilling victims, and obliquely excuses those who inflict the wounds. . . . Instead of being seen as deeply shameful, which it is, sexual violence has become chic.

—Stephan Chapman, *Chicago Tribune*

Advertising is a continuous and fertile source of gender display. Postmodern ads depict violent, threatening, and dangerous-looking male ideal types (such as military men, football players, boxers, and bikers). In a period in which there has been a loosening of rigid gender distinctions, advertising, with the exception of the androgynous male look in fashion, emphasizes gender differences. This means that masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity. In short, masculine images are dominant, intimidating, and violent, while feminine images are subordinate, receptive, and passive. For example, figure 3.47 shows a young woman with an ostensibly hot iron pressed against the side of her face. In differentiating masculinity from femininity, images of aggression and violence (including violence against women) arm men with self-esteem, security, and a socially validated masculine role.

The efficacy of violent behavior for males, including its rewards, is coded into advertising in several ways, “from violent male icons (such as particularly aggressive athletes or superheroes) overtly threatening consumers to buy products, to ads that exploit men’s feeling of not being big, strong or violent enough by promising to provide them with products that will enhance those qualities” (Katz 1995, 136).
These codes are present in television and radio commercials as well, but I choose to concentrate on mainstream magazine ads.

Various recurrent themes in print advertising support the notion of white masculinity as violence. These include “violence as genetically programmed male behavior, the use of military and sports symbolism to enhance the masculine appeal and identification of products, the association of muscularity with ideal masculinity, and the equation of heroic masculinity with violent masculinity” (Katz 1995, 136). In short, in advertising violence becomes fashionable and urbane. Often ads equate muscles with violent power.

Violence is not limited to print advertising and television. A shoe store window prominently displayed a men’s dress shoe resting on the throat of a female mannequin clothed only in a white shroud. In bold copy next to the shoes, “We’d kill for these!” “The relation of window dressing to modern culture is a chapter in art history still not written” (Twitchell 1996, 208).

Modern masculine archetypes in mainstream magazine ads normalize, legitimize, and excuse male violence. It’s no secret that sex sells. Advertising has been using it for years. Now, however, violence has become foreplay (see New York Times Magazine 1984). Ads are trying to show us that fighting is playful and that intimidation and violence have become stimulating forerunners to intimate socializing and sex. The nonchalance of the message is startling in what it implies about our desensitization to violence and about advertising’s role in promoting this numbness. White male privilege ignores or subjugates the perspectives and welfare of women, ethnic minorities, and even children.

Advertising not only makes this sexual genre of violent abuse tolerable but also unmistakably glorifies it. Sexual violence has become romantic and chic instead of being seen as grievously contemptible. Such ads are used by some of the most reputable manufacturers in mainstream magazines aimed at refined, stylish audiences (see, e.g., New York Times Magazine 1984). This is especially shocking. The eradication of domestic and sexual violence is not made any easier by such media images.

Ads show intimidated (figure 3.48) and fearful (figure 3.49) women and women as victims of violence (figure 3.50), potential violence, or the threat of violence (figure 3.51)—a clear extension of the structure of gender inequality. There is a fear of being pursued (figure 3.52) or raped. There are often representations of “stranger danger”—the male intruder (figures 3.53, 3.54, and 3.55). Ads convey the explicit message that women should submit to the desires of the intruder (figure 3.56). The representation of the intruder re-
inforces societal myths that sexual violence is committed mainly by strangers, that women secretly want to be raped, and that women invite rape by their behavior and their attire.

A fuller understanding of the connection between the cultural construction of masculinity and the prevalence of violence may point to effective intervention to prevent violent behavior.

Mock Assault

“Adults play mock assault games with children, games such as chase-and-capture and grab-and-squeeze. The child is playfully treated like a prey under attack by a predator” (Goffman 1976, 52). Of course, men play these games with women (and sometimes other men). Women often cooperate through a display of attempts to escape and through cries of alarm, fear, and appeasement. Underneath this roughhousing, clearly, is a deeper
level—one that is perhaps more sinister. Although the man is just playing, there is an implication of what damage he could really do if he were at all serious. We are able to view the mock assault display in advertising (figures 3.57–3.59).

Cross-Cultural Gender Attitudes

Ideas about gender roles, sexuality, obscenity, and standards of physical appearance vary across cultures. Sometimes the differences are subtle, sometimes more blatant. Some European countries, for example, are much more open about sexuality and accepting of nudity than the United States. Figure 3.60a, an American ad for Yves Saint Laurent, shows a male model seminude (shirtless) next to a female model with shirt unbuttoned exposing the center of her chest and midsection. Figure 3.60b, an ad for a French audience, contains the identical photograph except the female’s shirt is open wider, exposing both of her nipples.

Figure 3.61a, a French ad for Givenchy Hot Couture, shows a female model posing seductively, revealing cleavage, bare shoulders, and a leg all the way up to her hips. In contrast, figure 3.61b, also an ad for Givenchy Hot Couture, is directed at an Arabic audience (see text). Arabic culture demands more
modesty in the public display of women. Consequently, she is posed less seductively, revealing no cleavage, bare shoulders, or legs.

Figure 3.62, a pair of ads for Givenchy Hot Couture, again contrasts French and Arabic culture. The top ad is for a French audience. The female model is wearing a snug-fitting sleeveless white dress opened at the center revealing most of the woman’s chest and midsection. Her left hand cups her left breast. The bottom ad is for an Arabic audience and displays much less skin. The same model is wearing a similar white dress except it is long-sleeved and does not reveal any of the woman’s chest or midsection. In addition to not revealing any skin, the model modestly covers both her breasts with her hands.

The Feminist Critique of Advertising

We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth.

—Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women

Advertising has become sexual harassment.

—James B. Twitchell, Adcult USA
The feminist critique of advertising is a coherent indictment of advertising with a political following. It has produced real changes in the industry (Twitchell 1996, 142). Negative responses to advertising have undergone a remarkable transformation. At first, people merely complained about ads that offended them. Then consumers became braver; they started to deface ads, writing on them, for example, “This ad is racist!” or “That ad is sexist!” Now consumers are creating their own ads using companies’ recognizable logos and symbols to ridicule them (see “Subvertising,” chapter 1).

Advertising does more than sell products and services; it offers subjugation to consumption. The powerless and the marginal, especially ethnic minorities and women, are seduced into a commodifying system—what Marx called “false consciousness.” Although the feminist movement freed women from an oppressive social structure through its campaigns for the control of reproduction, career possibilities, sexual freedom, and, most important, economic and financial independence, advertising regained lost ground in the arenas of the mass media, medicine, law, and cosmetics through unrealistic portrayals of the ideal woman (Wolf 1991).

Although advertising affects the attitudes and behavior of individuals, behavior and attitudes are also affected by profound cultural forces. While it is true that advertising encourages women to “purge themselves, have breast implants, apply acid to their faces to peel off the wrinkles, go on innumerable, often dangerous, diets” (Twitchell 1996, 152), attempts by girls and women to beautify themselves, their bodies, hair, and faces go way back. They are no more novel than the ancient rites of passage carried out by adolescent boys.

Cultural and biological factors are at work here. The notion of the ideal woman is a social construct; it did not impose itself on an unwilling culture. Advertising reflects the traditional beliefs, myths, tales, and practices of our society and a culture based on commodities. Advertising articulates and channels cultural acts, but it does not create artificial desires nor mandate behavioral patterns.

It is true that advertising trends and strategies vary across generations. Products and services come and go. Technology advances. Cultures change, more slowly than not, over time. But the notion of the provocateur is as old as the concept of machismo. Cinderella, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy—I rest my case. “The face of a woman has been a commodity for some time” (Twitchell 1996, 152).

What are the effects of growing up and living within a cultural environment of ubiquitous, ritualized violent representations? The consequences are multifaceted, ranging from developmental to social, political, and psychological. I therefore reject the somewhat simplistic behaviorist model that holds that media violence causes real-life violence.