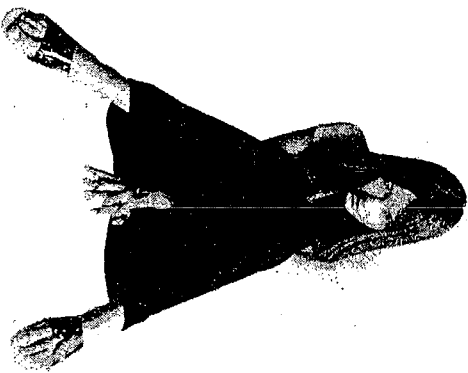


## 6

“THE MORE YOU SUBTRACT,  
THE MORE YOU ADD”

Cutting Girls Down to Size



The more you subtract, the more you add.

ALIX  
ARRAST EXCHANGE  
The more you subtract, the more you add.

Kilbourne, J. (2000). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. New York, NY: Touchstone. Chapter 6: The more you subtract, the more you add: Cutting girls down to size (pp. 128 - 154).

sumed me—my love affair with alcohol and cigarettes. As adults in a toxic culture, some of us fall in love with cars or chocolate cake or, more dangerously, drugs. But just as we are more vulnerable to the glory and heartbreak of romantic love than we will ever be again, at no time are we more vulnerable to the seductive power of advertising and of addiction than we are in adolescence.

Adolescents are new and inexperienced consumers—and such prime targets. They are in the process of learning their values and roles and developing their self-concepts. Most teenagers are sensitive to peer pressure and find it difficult to resist or even to question the dominant cultural messages perpetuated and reinforced by the media. Mass communication has made possible a kind of national peer pressure that erodes private and individual values and standards, as well as community values and standards. As Margaret Mead once said, today our children are not brought up by parents, they are brought up by the mass media.

Advertisers are aware of their role and do not hesitate to take advantage of the insecurities and anxieties of young people, usually in the guise of offering solutions. A cigarette provides a symbol of independence. A pair of designer jeans or sneakers convey status. The right perfume or beer resolves doubts about femininity or masculinity. All young people are vulnerable to these messages and adolescence is a difficult time for most people, perhaps especially these days. According to the Carnegie Corporation, “Nearly half of all American adolescents are at high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances.” But there is a particular kind of suffering in our culture that afflicts girls.

As most of us know so well by now, when a girl enters adolescence, she faces a series of losses—loss of self-confidence, loss of a sense of efficacy and ambition, and the loss of her “voice,” the sense of being a unique and powerful self that she had in childhood. Girls who were active, confident, feisty at the ages of eight and nine and ten often become hesitant, insecure, self-doubting at eleven. Their self-esteem plummets. As Carol Gilligan, Mary Pipher and other social critics and psychologists have pointed out in recent years, adolescent girls in America are afflicted with a range of problems, including low self-esteem, eating disorders, binge drinking, date rape and other dating violence, teen pregnancy, and a rise in cigarette smoking. Teenage women today are engaging in far riskier health behavior in greater numbers than any prior generation.

The gap between boys and girls is closing, but this is not always for the best. According to a 1998 status report by a consortium of universities and research centers, girls have closed the gap with boys in math performance and are coming

WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN, LIKE ALMOST EVERYONE ELSE IN THE WORLD, I FELT wildly in love for the first time. My feelings were so intense that now, decades later, I still dream about him from time to time. He was good for me in every way, but I also began a sinister love affair around the same time, one that nearly con-

close in science. But they are also now smoking, drinking, and using drugs as often as boys their own age. And, although girls are not nearly as violent as boys, they are committing more crimes than ever before and are far more often physically attacking each other.

It is important to understand that these problems go way beyond individual psychological development and pathology. Even girls who are raised in loving homes by supportive parents grow up in a toxic cultural environment, at risk for self-mutilation, eating disorders, and addictions. The culture, both reflected and reinforced by advertising, urges girls to adopt a false self, to bury alive their real selves, to become "feminine," which means to be nice and kind and sweet, to compete with other girls for the attention of boys, and to value romantic relationships with boys above all else. Girls are put into a terrible double bind. They are supposed to repress their power, their anger, their exuberance and be simply "nice," although they also eventually must compete with men in the business world and be successful. They must be overtly sexy and attractive but essentially passive and virginal. It is not surprising that most girls experience this time as painful and confusing, especially if they are unconscious of these conflicting demands.

Of course, it is impossible to speak accurately of girls as a monolithic group. The socialization that emphasizes passivity and compliance does not apply to many African-American and Jewish girls, who are often encouraged to be assertive and outspoken, and working-class girls are usually not expected to be stars in the business world. Far from protecting these girls from eating disorders and other problems, these differences more often mean that the problems remain hidden or undiagnosed and the girls are even less likely to get help. Eating problems affect girls from African-American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, and Latino families and from every socioeconomic background. The racism and classism that these girls experience exacerbate their problems. Sexism is by no means the only trauma they face.

We've learned a lot in recent years about the pressures on girls and the resulting problems. So much that some people think it is time to stop talking about it—maybe to focus on boys or just move on. It's important to remember that this discussion of the problems of adolescent girls is very recent. In 1980, not a single chapter in the *Handbook on Adolescent Psychology* was devoted to girls. As with other fields in psychology, the research was done on boys and assumed to apply to girls as well. The research on girls and the discussion of their issues is long overdue and far from complete.

Of course, we must continue to pay attention to the problems of boys, as well. Two books published recently address these problems. In *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thompson examine the "culture of cruelty" that boys live in and the "tyranny of toughness" that oppresses them. In *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, psychologist William Pollock examines the ways that boys manifest their social and emotional disconnection through anger and violence. We've seen the tragic results of this in the school shootings, all by angry and alienated boys.

The truth is that the problems of boys and girls are related, and not only because girls are often the victims of these angry, violent boys and the men they become. The "emotional illiteracy" of men, as Kindlon and Thompson call it, harms boys and girls, men and women. Most of us understand that the cultural environment plays a powerful role in creating these problems. But we still have a lot to learn about the precise nature of this role—and what we can do about it. How can we resist these destructive messages and images? The first step, as always, is to become as conscious of them as possible, to deconstruct them. Although I am very sympathetic to the harm done to boys by our cultural environment, the focus of my work has always been on girls and women.

Girls try to make sense of the contradictory expectations of themselves in a culture dominated by advertising. Advertising is one of the most potent messengers in a culture that can be toxic for girls' self-esteem. Indeed, if we looked only at advertising images, this would be a bleak world for females. Girls are extremely desirable to advertisers because they are new consumers, are beginning to have significant disposable income, and are developing brand loyalty that might last a lifetime. Teenage girls spend over \$4 billion annually on cosmetics alone.

*Seventeen*, a magazine aimed at girls about twelve to fifteen, sells these girls to advertisers in an ad that says, "She's the one you want. She's the one we've got." The copy continues, "She pursues beauty and fashion at every turn" and concludes with, "It's more than a magazine. It's her life." In another similar ad, *Seventeen* refers to itself as a girl's "Bible." Many girls read maga-



zines like this and take the advice seriously. Regardless of the intent of the advertisers, what are the messages that girls are getting? What are they told?

Primarily girls are told by advertisers that what is most important about them is their perfume, their clothing, their bodies, their beauty. Their "essence" is their underwear. "He says the first thing he noticed about you is your great personality," says an ad featuring a very young woman in tight jeans. The copy continues, "He lies." "If this is your idea of a great catch," says an ad for a cosmetic kit from a teen magazine featuring a cute boy, "this is your tackle box." Even very little girls are offered makeup and toys like Special Night Barbie, which shows them how to dress up for a night out. Girls of all ages get the message that they must be flawlessly beautiful and, above all these days, they must be thin.

Even more destructively, they get the message that this is possible, that, with enough effort and self-sacrifice, they can achieve this ideal. Thus many girls spend enormous amounts of time and energy attempting to achieve something that is not only trivial but also completely unattainable. The glossy images of flawlessly beautiful and extremely thin women that surround us would not have the impact they do if we did not live in a culture that encourages us to believe we can and should remake our bodies into perfect commodities. These images play into the American belief of transformation and ever-new possibilities, no longer via hard work but via the purchase of the right products. As Anne Becker has pointed out, this belief is by no means universal. People in many other cultures may admire a particular body shape without seeking to emulate it. In the Western world, however, "the anxiety of nonrecognition ('I don't fit in') faced by the majority of spectators is more often translated into identifications ('I want to be like that') and attempts at self-alteration than into rage."

Women are especially vulnerable because our bodies have been objectified and commodified for so long. And young women are the most vulnerable, especially those who have experienced early deprivation, sexual abuse, family violence, or other trauma. Cultivating a thinner body offers some hope of control and success to a young woman with a poor self-image and overwhelming personal problems that have no easy solutions.

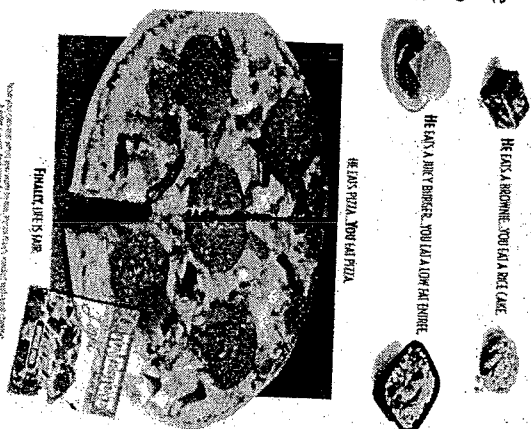
Although troubled young women are especially vulnerable, these messages affect all girls. A researcher at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston found that the more frequently girls read magazines, the more likely they were to diet and to feel that magazines influence their ideal body shape. Nearly half reported wanting to lose weight because of a magazine picture (but only 29 percent were

actually overweight). Studies at Stanford University and the University of Massachusetts found that about 70 percent of college women say they feel worse about their own looks after reading women's magazines. Another study, this one of 350 young men and women, found that a preoccupation with one's appearance takes a toll on mental health. Women scored much higher than men on what the researchers called "self-objectification." This tendency to view one's body from the outside in—regarding physical attractiveness, sex appeal, measurements, and weight as more central to one's physical identity than health, strength, energy level, coordination, or fitness—has many harmful effects, including diminished mental performance, increased feelings of shame and anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, and the development of eating disorders.

These images of women seem to affect men most strikingly by influencing how they judge the real women in their lives. Male college students who viewed just one episode of *Charlie's Angels*, the hit television show of the 1970s that featured three beautiful women, were harsher in their evaluations of the attractiveness of potential dates than were males who had not seen the episode. In another study, male college students shown centerfolds from *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were more likely to find their own girlfriends less sexually attractive.

Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to the obsession with thinness, for many reasons. One is the ominous peer pressure on young people. Adolescence is a time of such self-consciousness and terror of shame and humiliation. Boys are shamed for being too small, too "weak," too soft, too sensitive. And girls are shamed for being too sexual, too loud, too boisterous, too big (in any sense of the word), having too hearty an appetite. Many young women have told me that their boyfriends wanted them to lose weight. One said that her boyfriend had threatened to leave her if she didn't lose five pounds. "Why don't you leave him," I asked, "and lose 160?"

The situation is very different for men. The double standard is reflected in an ad for a low-fat pizza: "He eats a brownie . . . you eat a rice cake. He eats a



HE EATS A BROWNIE, YOU EAT A LOW-FAT PIZZE

juicy burger . . . you eat a low fat entree. He eats pizza . . . you eat pizza. Finally, life is fair." Although some men develop eating problems, the predominant cultural message remains that a hearty appetite and a large size is desirable in a man, but not so in a woman.

Indeed, a 1997 television campaign targets ravenous teenage boys by offering Taco Bell as the remedy for hunger (and also linking eating with sex via the slogan "Want some?"). One commercial features a fat guy who loses his composure when he realizes his refrigerator is empty. In another, two quite heavy guys have dozed off in front of a television set and are awakened by hunger pangs, which only Taco Bell can satisfy. It is impossible to imagine this campaign aimed at teenage girls.

Normal physiological changes during adolescence result in increased body fat for women. If these normal changes are considered undesirable by the culture (and by parents and peers), this can lead to chronic anxiety and concern about weight control in young women. A ten-year-old girl wrote to *New Moon*, a feminist magazine for girls, "I was at the beach and was in my bathing suit. I have kind of fat legs, and my uncle told me I had fat legs in front of all my cousins and my cousins' friends. I was so embarrassed, I went up to my room and shut the door. When I went downstairs again, everyone started teasing me." Young women are even encouraged to worry about small fluctuations in their weight. "Sometimes what you wear to dinner may depend on what you eat for breakfast," says an ad for cereal that pictures a slinky black dress. In truth, daily and weekly and monthly fluctuations in weight are perfectly normal.

The obsession starts early. Some studies have found that from 40 to 80 percent of fourth-grade girls are dieting. Today at least one-third of twelve- to thirteen-year-old girls are actively trying to lose weight, by dieting, vomiting, using laxatives, or taking diet pills. One survey found that 63 percent of high-school girls were on diets, compared with only 16 percent of men. And a survey in Massachusetts found that the single largest group of high-school students considering or attempting suicide are girls who feel they are overweight. Imagine. Girls made to feel so terrible about themselves that they would rather be dead than fat. This wouldn't be happening, of course, if it weren't for our last "socially acceptable" prejudice—weightism. Fat children are ostracized and ridiculed from the moment they enter school, and fat adults, women in particular, are subjected to public contempt and scorn. This strikes terror into the hearts of all women, many

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of whom, unfortunately, identify with the oppressor and become vicious to themselves and each other.

No wonder it is hard to find a woman, especially a young woman, in America today who has a truly healthy attitude toward her body and toward food. Just as range of alcohol use and abuse, so are bulimia and anorexia the extreme results of an obsession with eating and weight control that grips many young women with serious and potentially very dangerous results. Although eating problems are often thought to result from vanity, the truth is that they, like other addictions and compulsive behavior, usually have deeper roots—not only genetic predisposition and biochemical vulnerabilities, but also childhood sexual abuse.

Advertising doesn't cause eating problems, of course, any more than it causes alcoholism. Anorexia in particular is a disease with a complicated etiology, and media images probably don't play a major role. However, these images certainly contribute to the body-hatred so many young women feel and to some of the resulting eating problems, which range from bulimia to compulsive overeating to simply being obsessed with controlling one's appetite. Advertising does thus provide abusive and abnormal attitudes about eating, drinking, and thinness. It is of denial in which these diseases flourish.

The influence of the media is strikingly illustrated in a recent study that found a sharp rise in eating disorders among young women in Fiji soon after the introduction of television to the culture. Before television was available, there was little talk of dieting in Fiji. "You've gained weight" was a traditional compliment and "going thin" the sign of a problem. In 1995 television came to the island. Within three years, the number of teenagers at risk for eating disorders more than doubled, 74 percent of the teens in the study said they felt "too big or too fat," and 62 percent said they had dieted in the past month. Of course, this doesn't prove a direct causal link between television and eating disorders. Fiji is a culture in transition in many ways. However, it seems more than coincidental that the Fiji girls who were heavy viewers of television were 50 percent more likely to describe themselves as fat and 30 percent more likely to diet than those girls who watched television less frequently. As Ellen Goodman says, "The big success story of our entertainment industry is our ability to export insecurity. We can make any woman anywhere feel perfectly rotten about her shape."



"Honey, do I look fat?" you can handle this." These two are so intimate that she can share her deepest fears with him—and he can respond by chuckling at her adorable vulnerability and knocking back another scotch. And everyone who sees the ad gets the message that it is perfectly normal for all young women, including thin and attractive ones, to worry about their weight.

"Put some weight on," says a British ad featuring an extremely thin young woman—but the ad is referring to her watch. She is so thin she can wear the watch on her upper arm—and this is supposed to be a good thing.

Not all of this is intentional on the part of the advertisers, of course. A great deal of it is based on research and is intended to arouse anxiety and affect women's self-esteem. But some of it reflects the unconscious attitudes and beliefs of the individual advertisers, as well as what Carl Jung referred to as the "collective unconscious." Advertisers are members of the culture too and have been as thoroughly conditioned as anyone else. The magazines and the ads deliberately create and intensify anxiety about weight because it is so profitable. On a deeper level, however, they *reflect* cultural concerns and conflicts about women's power. Real freedom for women would change the very basis of our male-dominated society. It is not surprising that many men (and women, to be sure) fear this.

"The more you subtract, the more you add," says an ad that ran in several women's and teen magazines in 1997. Surprisingly, it is an ad for clothing, not for a diet product. Overtly, it is a statement about minimalism in fashion. However, the fact that the girl in the ad is very young and very thin reinforces another message, a message that an adolescent girl constantly gets from advertising and throughout the popular culture, the message that she should diminish herself, she should be less than she is.

On the most obvious and familiar level, this refers to her body. However, the loss, the subtraction, the cutting down to size also refers to her sense of her self, her sexuality, her need for authentic connection, and her longing for power and freedom. I certainly don't think that the creators of this particular ad had all this in mind. They're simply selling expensive clothing in an unoriginal way, by using a very young and very thin woman—and an unfortunate tagline. It wouldn't be important at all were there not so many other ads that reinforce this message and did it not coincide with a cultural crisis taking place now for adolescent girls.

"We cut Judy down to size," says an ad for a health club. "Soon, you'll both be taking up less space," says an ad for a collapsible treadmill, referring both to the product and to the young woman exercising on it. *The obsession with thinness is most deeply about cutting girls and women down to size.* It is only a symbol, albeit a very powerful and destructive one, of tremendous fear of female power. Powerful women are seen by many people (women as well as men) as inherently destructive and dangerous. Some argue that it is men's awareness of just how powerful women can be that has created the attempts to keep women small. Indeed, thinness as an ideal has always accompanied periods of greater freedom for women—as soon as we got the vote, boyish flapper bodies came into vogue. No wonder there is such pressure on young women today to be thin, to shrink to be like little girls, not to take up too much space, literally or figuratively.

At the same time there is relentless pressure on women to be small, there is also pressure on us to succeed, to achieve, to "have it all." We can be successful as long as we stay "feminine" (i.e., powerless enough not to be truly threatening). One way to do this is to present an image of fragility, to look like a waif. This demonstrates that one is both in control and still very "feminine." One of the many double binds tormenting young women today is the need to be both sophisticated and accomplished, yet also delicate and childlike. Again, this applies mostly to middle- to upper-class white women.

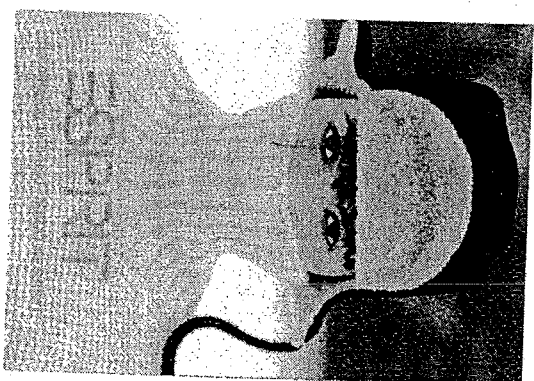
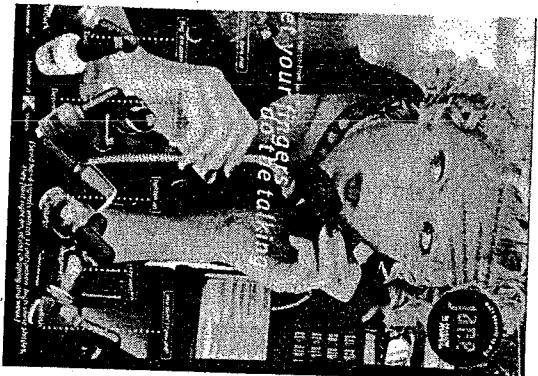
The changing roles and greater opportunities for women promised by the women's movement are trivialized, reduced to the private search for the slimmest body. In one commercial, three skinny young women dance and sing about the "taste of freedom." They are feeling free because they can now eat bread, thanks to a low-calorie version. A commercial for a fast-food chain features a very slim young woman who announces, "I have a license to eat." The salad bar and lighter fare have given her freedom to eat (as if eating for women were a privilege rather than a need). "Free yourself," says ad after ad for diet products.

You can never be too rich or too thin, girls are told. This mass delusion sells a lot of products. It also causes enormous suffering, involving girls in false quests for power and control, while deflecting attention and energy from that which might really empower them. "A declaration of independence," proclaims an ad for perfume that features an emaciated model, but in fact the quest for a body as thin as the model's becomes a prison for many women and girls.

The quest for independence can be a problem too if it leads girls to deny the importance of and need for interpersonal relationships. Girls and young women today are encouraged by the culture to achieve a very "masculine" kind of autonomy and independence, one that excludes interdependence, mutuality, and connection with others. Catherine Steiner-Adair suggests that perhaps eating disorders emerge at adolescence because it is at this point that "females expect-ence themselves to be at a crossroads in their lives where they must shift from a relational approach to life to an autonomous one, a shift that can represent an intolerable loss when independence is associated with isolation." In this sense, she sees eating disorders as political statements, a kind of hunger strike: "Girls with eating disorders have a heightened, albeit confused, grasp of the dangerous imbalance of the culture's values, which they cannot articulate in the face of the culture's abject denial of their adolescent intuitive truth, so they tell their story with their bodies."

Most of us know by now about the damage done to girls by the tyranny of the ideal image, weightism, and the obsession with thinness. But girls get other messages too that "cut them down to size" more subtly. In ad after ad girls are urged to be "barely there"—beautiful but silent. Of course, girls are not just influenced by images of other girls. They are even more powerfully attuned to images of women, because they learn from these images what is expected of them, what they are to become. And they see these images again and again in the magazines they read, even those magazines designed for teenagers, and in the commercials they watch.

"Make a statement without saying a word," says an ad for perfume. And indeed this is one of the primary messages of the culture to adolescent girls. "The silence of a look can reveal more than words," says another perfume ad, this one featuring a woman lying on her back. "More than words can say," says yet another perfume ad, and a clothing ad says, "Classic is speaking your mind (without saying a word)." An ad for lipstick says, "Watch your mouth, young lady," while one for nail polish says, "Let your fingers do the talking," and one for hairspray



promises "hair that speaks volumes." In another ad, a young woman's turtle-neck is pulled over her mouth. And an ad for a movie soundtrack features a chilling image of a young woman with her lips sewn together.

It is not only the girls themselves who see these images, of course. Their parents and teachers and doctors see them and they influence their sense of how girls should be. A 1999 study done at the University of Michigan found that, beginning in preschool, girls are told to be quiet much more often than boys. Although boys were much noisier than girls, the girls were told to speak softly or to use a "nicer" voice about three times more often. Girls were encouraged to be quiet, small, and physically constrained. The researcher concluded that one of the consequences of this socialization is that girls grow into women afraid to speak up for themselves or to use their voices to protect themselves from a variety of dangers.

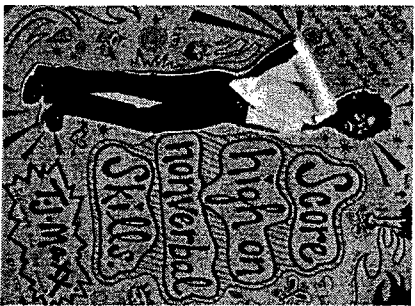
A television commercial features a very young woman lying on a bed, giggling, silly. Suddenly a male

**STRANGELAND**  
The Ultimate  
LOUD ROCK SOUNDTRACK

Presented by  
Marilyn Manson  
Twisted Sister  
Megadeth  
Pomplama  
**SOULFLY**  
Anthrax  
Sevendust  
Bleed  
Coal Chamber  
System of a Down  
Strat  
frenD p.e.  
Kid Rock  
and more!

**dayintheLife**  
and more!

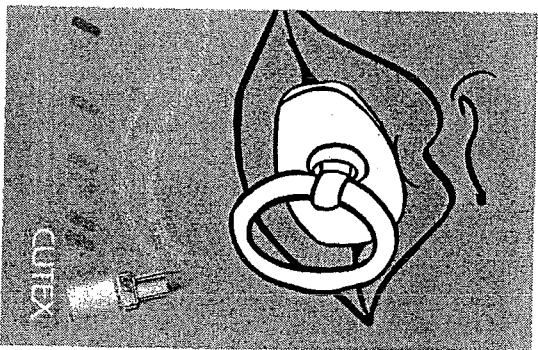
Movie Opens OCTOBER and  
TV Soundtrack: 21.95, 26.95, 34.95, 39.95  
www.dayintheLife.com www.fox.com



hand comes forward. His finger touches her lips and she becomes silent, her face blank. Another commercial features a very young woman, shot in black and white but with colored contact lenses. She never speaks but she touches her face and her hair as a female voiceover says, "Your eyes don't just see, they also speak... Your eyes can say a lot, but they don't have to shout. They can speak softly. Let your eyes be heard... without making a sound." The commercial ends with the young woman putting her finger in her mouth.

"Score high on nonverbal skills," says a clothing ad featuring a young African-American woman, while an ad for mascara tells young women to "make up your own language." And an Italian ad features a very thin young woman in an elegant coat sitting on a window seat. The copy says, "This woman is silent. This coat talks." Girls, seeing these images of women, are encouraged to be silent, mysterious, not to talk too much or too loudly. In many different ways, they are told "the more you subtract, the more you add." In this kind of climate, a Buffalo jeans ad featuring a young woman screaming, "I don't have to scream for attention but I do," can seem like an improvement—until we notice that she's really getting attention by unbuttoning her blouse to her navel. This is typical of the mixed messages so many ads and other forms of the media give girls. The young woman seems fierce and powerful, but she's really exposed, vulnerable.

The January 1998 cover of *Seventeen* highlights an article, "Do you talk too much?" On the back cover is an ad for Express mascara, which promises "high voltage volume instantly!" As if the way that girls can express themselves and turn up the volume is via their mascara. Is this harmless word-play or is it a sophisticated and clever marketing ploy based on research about the silencing of girls, deliberately designed to attract them with the promise of at least some form of self-

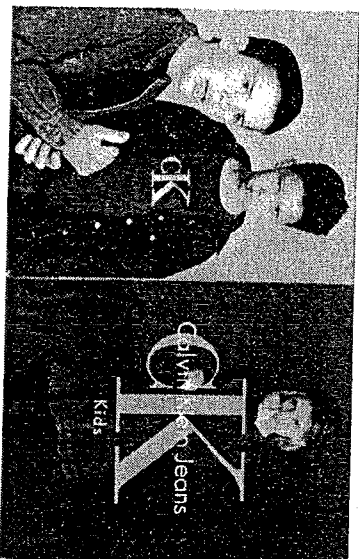


expression? Advertisers certainly spend a lot of money on psychological research and focus groups. I would expect these groups to reveal, among other things, that teenage girls are angry but reticent. Certainly the cumulative effect of these images and words urging girls to express themselves only through their bodies and through products is serious and harmful.

Many ads feature girls and young women in very passive poses, limp, doll-like, sometimes acting like little girls, playing with dolls and wearing bows in their hair. One ad uses a pacifier to sell lipstick and another the image of a baby to sell BabyDoll Blush Highlight. "Lolita seems to be a comeback kid," says a fashion layout featuring a woman wearing a ridiculous hairstyle and a baby-doll dress, standing with shoulders slumped and feet apart. In women's and teen magazines it is virtually impossible to tell the fashion layouts from the ads. Indeed, they exist to support each other.

As Erving Goffman pointed out in *Gender Advertisements*, we learn a great deal about the disparate power of males and females simply through the body language and poses of advertising. Women, especially young women, are generally subservient to men in ads, through both size and position. Sometimes it is as blatant as the woman serving as a footrest in the ad for Think Skateboards.

Other times, it is more subtle but quite striking. (Once one becomes aware of it.) The double-paged spread for Calvin Klein's clothing for kids conveys a world of information about the relative power of boys and girls. One of the boys seems



to be in the act of speaking, expressing himself, while the girl has her hand over her mouth. Boys are generally shown in ads as active, rambunctious, while girls are more often passive and focused on their appearance. The exception to the rule involves African-American children, male and female, who are often shown in advertising as passive observers of their white playmates.

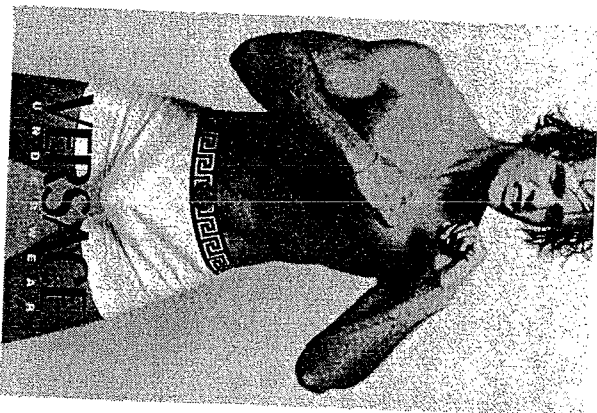
That these stereotypes continue, in spite of all the recent focus on the harm done to girls by enforced passivity, is evident in the most casual glance at parents' magazines. In the ads in the March 1999 issues of *Child* and *Parents*, all of the boys are active and all of the girls are passive. In *Child*, a boy plays on the jungle gym in one ad, while in another, a girl stands quietly, looking down, holding some flowers. In *Parents*, a boy rides a bike, full of excitement, while a girl is happy about having put on lipstick. It's hard to believe that this is 1999 and not 1959. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Girls are often shown as playful clowns in ads, perpetuating the attitude that girls and women are childish and cannot be taken seriously; whereas even very young men are generally portrayed as secure, powerful, and serious. People in control of their lives stand upright, alert, and ready to meet the world. In contrast, females often appear off-balance, insecure, and weak. Often our body parts are bent, conveying unpreparedness, submissiveness, and appeasement. We exhibit



what Goffman terms "licensed withdrawal"—seeming to be psychologically removed, disoriented, defenseless, spaced out.

Females touch people and things delicately, we caress, whereas males grip, clench, and grasp. We cover our faces with our hair or our hands, conveying shame or embarrassment. And, no matter what happens, we keep on smiling.



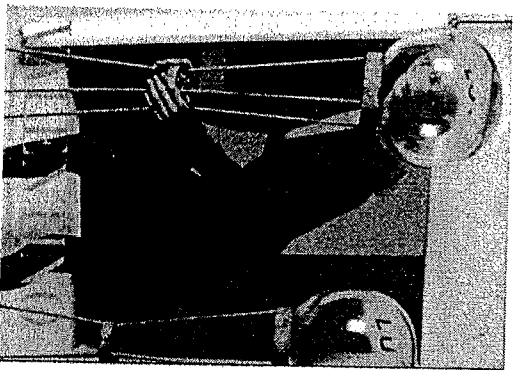




"Just smiling the bothers away," as one ad says. This ad is particularly disturbing because the model is a young African-American woman, a member of a group that has long been encouraged to just keep smiling, no matter what. She's even wearing a kerchief, like Aunt Jemima. The cultural fear of angry women is intensified dramatically when the women are African-American.

An extreme example of the shaming and trivialization of girls and women is a recent little trend of ads featuring young women sitting on the toilet, such as the shoe ad with popular MTV star Jenny McCarthy (although the ad offended a lot of people, it also boosted sales of Candies shoes by 19 percent). Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not restricted to the United States. An Italian ad for sneakers and a British one for a magazine use the same image. Such pictures are especially humiliating to self-conscious teenagers.

Girls and young women are often presented as blank and fragile. Floating in space, adrift in a snowstorm. A Valentino clothing ad perhaps unwittingly illustrates the tragedy of adolescence for girls. It features a very young woman with her head seemingly enclosed in a glass bubble labeled "Love." Some ads and fashion layouts picture girls as mermaids or under-

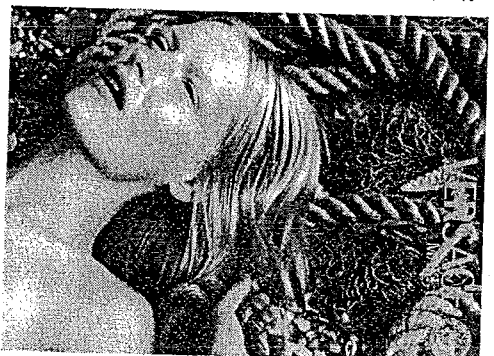


water as if they were drowning—or lying on the ground as if washed up to shore, such as the Versace makeup ad picturing a young girl caught up in fishing nets, rope, and seashells. An ad for vodka features a woman in the water and the copy: "In a past life I was a mermaid who fell in love with an ancient mariner. I pulled him into the sea to be my husband. I didn't know he couldn't breathe underwater." Of course, she can't breathe underwater either.

Breathe underwater. As girls come of age sexually, the culture gives them impossibly contradictory messages. As the *Seventeen* ad says, "She wants to be outrageous. And accepted." Advertising slogans such as "because innocence is sexier than you think," "Purity, yes. Innocence never," and "nothing so sensual was ever so innocent" place them in a double bind. "Only something so pure could inspire such unspeakable passion," declares an ad for Jovan musk that features a white flower. Somehow girls are supposed to be both innocent and seductive, virginal and experienced, all at the same time. As they quickly learn, this is tricky.

Females have long been divided into virgins and whores, of course. What is new is that girls are now supposed to embody both within themselves. This is symbolic of the central contradiction of the culture—we must work hard and produce and achieve success and yet, at the same time, we are encouraged to live impulsively, spend a lot of money, and be constantly and immediately gratified. This tension is reflected in our attitudes toward many things, including sex and eating. Girls are promised fulfillment both through being thin and through eating rich foods, just as they are promised fulfillment through being innocent and virginal and through wild and impulsive sex.

Young people, boys and girls, are surrounded by messages urging them to be sexually active. Teachers report a steady escalation





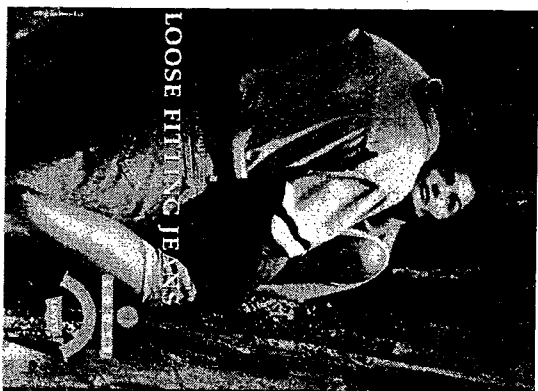
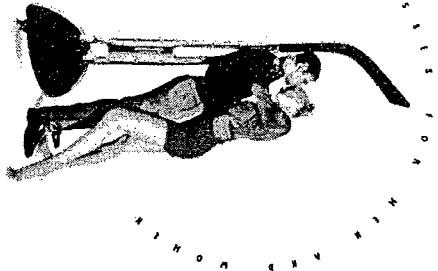
**YOU CAN LEARN MORE ABOUT ANATOMY AFTER SCHOOL.**

of sex talk among children, starting in preschool, as our children are prematurely exposed to a barrage of sexual information and misinformation through advertising, television shows, music, and films. "You can learn more about anatomy after school," says an ad for jeans, which manages to trivialize sex, relationships, and education all in one sentence.

The consequences of all this sexual pressure on children are frightening. The average age of first sexual intercourse is about sixteen for girls and fifteen for boys. Far more disturbing is the fact that seven in ten girls who had sex before the age of fourteen and six in ten of those who had sex before the age of fifteen report having sex involuntarily. One of every ten girls under the age of twenty becomes pregnant in the United States each year, more than in any other industrialized country in the world; twice as high as in England and Wales, France and Canada, and nine times as high as in the Netherlands or Japan. And as many as one in six sexually active adolescents has a sexually transmitted disease.

Of course, advertising and the media are not solely to blame for these appalling statistics. But they are the leading source of sex education in the nation

**POLICE**  
MURDER



and they create a climate which encourages a very cavalier attitude toward sex. The typical teenage viewer who watches an average of three to five hours of television a day sees a minimum of two thousand sexual acts per year on television alone. There is also abundant sexual activity, of course, in music videos, books, movies, cartoons, video games, and song lyrics aimed at teenagers, almost all of it portraying sexual behavior as consequence-free and much of it exploiting women's bodies and glamorizing sexual violence. Magazines targeting girls and young women are filled with ads and articles on how to be beautiful and sexy and appealing to boys—all in service of the advertisers, of course, who sell their wares on almost every page: "How Smart Girls Flirt," "Sex to Write Home About," "15 Ways Sex Makes You Prettier," and "Are You Good in Bed?" are some of the cover stories for a teen magazine called *Jane*.

At the same time, there is rarely any accurate information about sex (the networks still refuse to run condom ads) and certainly never any emphasis on relationships or intimacy (there is hardly time in thirty seconds for the sexual encounter, let alone any development of character!). We have to fight to get sex education into our schools, and the government refuses to fund any program that doesn't insist on abstinence as the only choice suitable for young people (how quickly people forget their own adolescence). Young people learn in school and in church that sex can hurt or kill them, but not that it can bring pleasure, joy and connection. How can they learn to say "Yes!" in a loving and responsible way?

It is difficult to do the kind of research that would prove the effects of the media on sexual attitudes and behavior—because of the perceived sensitivity of sex as a topic and because of the difficulty in finding a comparison group. However, the few existing studies consistently point to a relationship between exposure to sexual content and sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Two studies have found correlations between watching higher doses of "sexy" television and early initiation of sexual intercourse, and studies of adolescents have found that

heavy television viewing is predictive of negative attitudes toward virginity. In general, key communication theories and years of research on other kinds of communications effects, such as the effect of violent images, suggest that we are indeed affected by the ubiquitous, graphic, and consequence-free depictions of sexual behavior that surround us in all forms of the mass media.

Jane Brown and her colleagues concluded from their years of research that the mass media are important sex educators for American teenagers. Other potential educators, such as parents, schools, and churches, are doing an inadequate job, and even if that were to change dramatically, the media would remain compelling teachers. Brown faults media portrayals for avoiding the "three C's"—commitment, contraceptives, and consequences—and concludes, "It is, little wonder that adolescents find the sexual world a difficult and often confusing place and that they engage in early and unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners."

The emphasis for girls and women is always on being desirable, not on experiencing desire. Girls who want to be sexually active instead of simply being the objects of male desire are given only one model to follow, that of exploitive male sexuality. It seems that advertisers can't conceive of a kind of power that isn't manipulative and exploitive or a way that women can be actively sexual without being like traditional men.

Women who are "powerful" in advertising are uncommitted. They treat men like sex objects: "If I want a man to see my bra, I take him home," says an androgynous young woman. They are elusive and distant: "She is the first woman who refused to take your phone calls," says one ad. As if it were a good thing to be rude and inconsiderate. Why should any of us, male or female, be interested in someone who won't take our phone calls, who either cares so little for us or is so manipulative?

Mostly though, girls are not supposed to have sexual agency. They are supposed to be passive, swept away, overpowered. "See where it takes you," says a perfume ad featuring a couple passionately embracing. "Unleash your fantasies," says another. "A force of nature." This contributes to the strange and damaging concept of the "good girl" as the one who is swept away, unprepared for sex, versus the "bad girl" as the one who plans for sex, uses contraception, and is generally responsible. A young woman can manage to have sex and yet in some sense maintain her virginity by being "out of control," drunk, or deep in denial about the entire experience.

No wonder most teenage pregnancies occur when one or both parties is drunk. Alcohol and other mind-altering drugs permit sexual activity at the same time that they allow denial. One is almost literally not there. The next day one has an excuse. I was drunk, I was swept away. I did not choose this experience.

In adolescence girls are told that they have to give up much of what they know about relationships and intimacy if they want to attract men. Most tragically, they are told they have to give up each other. The truth is that one of the most powerful antidotes to destructive cultural messages is close and supportive female friendships. But girls are often encouraged by the culture to sacrifice their relationships with each other and to enter into hostile competition for the attention of boys and men. "What the bitch who's about to steal your man wears," says one ad. And many ads feature young women fighting or glaring at each other.

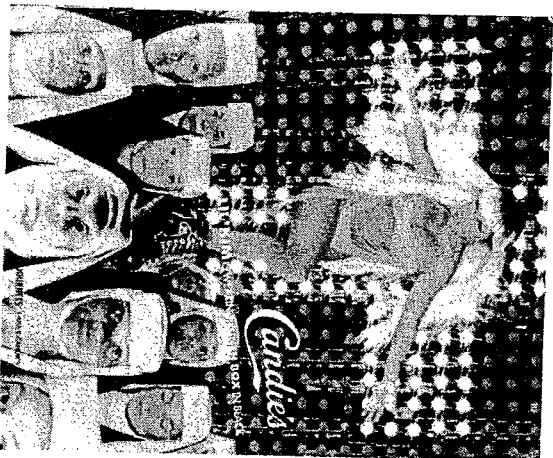
Of course, some girls do resist and rebel. Some are encouraged (by someone—a loving parent, a supportive teacher) to see the cultural contradictions clearly and to break free in a healthy and positive way. Others rebel in ways that damage themselves. A young woman seems to have only two choices: She can bury her sexual self, be a "good girl," give in to what Carol Gilligan terms "the tyranny of nice and kind" (and numb the pain by overeating or starving or cutting herself or drinking heavily). Or she can become a rebel—flaunt her sexuality, seduce inappropriate partners, smoke, drink flamboyantly, use other drugs. Both of these responses are self-destructive, but they begin as an attempt to survive, not to self-destruct.

Many girls become women who split themselves in two and do both—have a double life, a secret life—a good girl in public, out of control in private. A feminist in public, involved in an abusive relationship or lost in sadomasochistic fantasies in private. A lawyer by day, a barfly by night. Raiding the refrigerator or drinking themselves into a stupor alone in their kitchens at night, after the children are in bed, the laundry done. Doing well in school, but smoking in order to have a sexier, cooler image. Being sexual only when drunk.



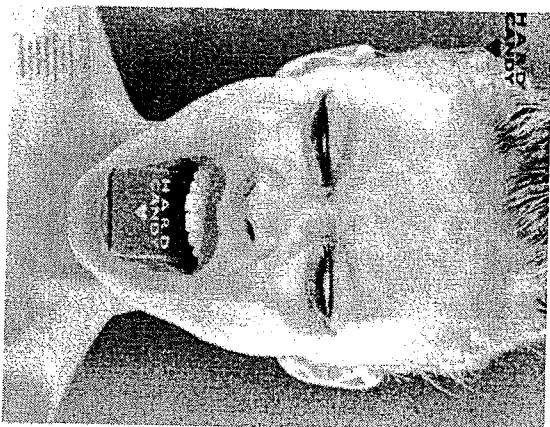
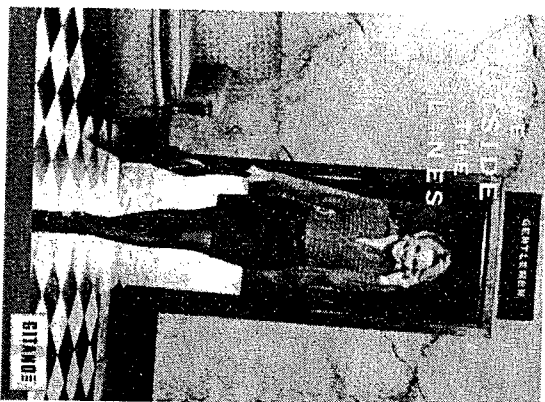
There are few healthy alternatives for girls who want to truly rebel against restrictive gender roles and stereotypes. The recent emphasis on girl power has led to some real advances for girls and young women, especially in the arenas of music and sports. But it is as often co-opted and trivialized. The Indigo Girls are good and true, but it is the Spice Girls who rule. Magazines like *New Moon*, *Hues*, and *Teen Voices* offer a real alternative to the glib, boy-crazy, appearance-obsessed teen magazines on the newsstands, but they have to struggle for funds since they take no advertising. There are some good zines and Websites for girls on the Internet but there are also countless sites that degrade and endanger them. And Barbie continues to rake in two billion dollars a year and will soon have a postal stamp in her honor—while a doll called “Happy to be me,” similar to Barbie but much more realistic and down to earth, was available for a couple of years in the mid-1990s (I bought one for my daughter) and then vanished from sight. Of course, Barbie’s makers have succumbed to pressure somewhat and have remade her with a thicker waist, smaller breasts, and slimmer hips. As a result, according to Anthony Cortese, she has already lost her waitressing job at Hooter’s and her boyfriend Ken has told her that he wants to start seeing other dolls.

Girls who want to escape the stereotypes are viewed with glee by advertisers, who rush to offer them, as always, power via products. The emphasis in the ads is always on their sexuality, which is exploited to sell them makeup and clothes and shoes. “Lil’ Kim is wearing lunch box in black,” says a shoe ad featuring a bikini-clad young woman in a platinum wig stepping over a group of nuns—the ultimate bad girl, I guess, but also the ultimate sex object. A demon woman sells a perfume called Hypnotic Poison. A trio of extremely thin African-American women brandish hair appliances and products as if they were weapons—and the brand is giu. A cosmetics company has a line of products called “Bad Gal.” In one ad, eyeliner is shown in cartoon version as a girl, who is holding a dog saying, “grrr,” surely a reference to “grrrris,” a symbol these days of “girl power” (as in



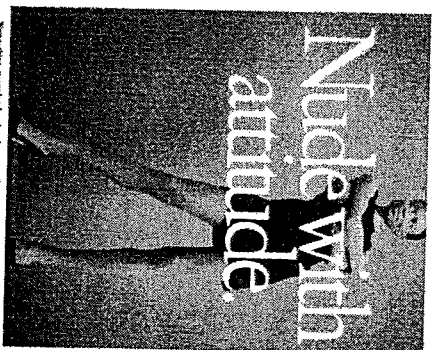
cybergrrrl.com, the popular Website for girls and young women). Unfortunately, girl power doesn't mean much if girls don't have the tools to achieve it. Without reproductive freedom and freedom from violence, girl power is nothing but a marketing slogan. So, for all the attention paid to girls in recent years, what girls are offered mostly by the popular culture is a superficial toughness, an "attitude," exemplified by smoking, drinking, and engaging in casual sex—all behaviors that harm themselves. In 1990 Virginia Slims offered girls a T-shirt that said, "Sugar and spice and everything nice? Get real." In 1997 Winston used the same theme in an ad featuring a tough young woman shooting pool and saying, "I'm not all sugar & spice. And neither are my smokes." As if the alternative to the feminine stereotype was sarcasm and toughness, and as if smoking was somehow an expression of one's authentic self ("get real").

Of course, the readers and viewers of these ads don't take them literally. But we do take them in—another grain of sand in a slowly accumulating and vast sandpile. If we entirely enter the world of ads, imagine them to be real for a moment, we find that the sandpile has completely closed us in, and there's only one escape route—buy something. "Get the power," says an ad featuring a woman showing off her biceps. "The power to clean anything," the ad continues. "Hey girls, you've got the power of control" says an ad for . . . hairspray. "The possibilities are endless" (clothing). "Never lose control" (hairspray again). "You never had this much control when you were on your own" (hair gel). "Exceptional character" (a watch). "An enlightening experience" (face powder). "Inner strength" (vitamins). "Only Victoria's Secret could make control so sensual" (girdles). "Stronger longer" (shampoo). Of course, the empowerment, the enlightenment, is as impossible to get through products as is anything else—love, security, romance, passion. On one level, we know this. On another, we keep buying and hoping—and buying. Other ads go further and offer products as a way to rebel, to be a real individual. "Live outside the lines," says a clothing ad featuring a young woman walk-



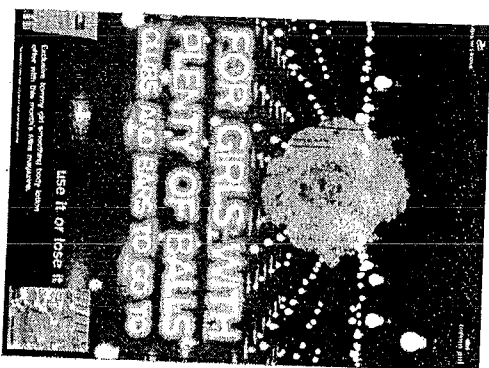
ing out of a men's room. This kind of rebellion isn't going to rock the world. And, no surprise, the young woman is very thin and conventionally pretty. Another pretty young woman sells a brand of jeans called "Revolt." "Don't just change... revolt," says the copy, but the young woman is passive, slight, her eyes averted.

"Think for yourself," says yet another hollow-checked young woman, demonstrating her individuality via an expensive and fashionable sweater. "Be amazing" (cosmetics). "Inside every woman is a star" (clothing). "If you're going to create electricity, use it" (watches). "If you let your spirit out, where would it go" (perfume). These women are all perfect examples of conventional "femininity" as is the young woman in a Halston perfume ad that says, "And when she was bad she wore Halston." What kind of "bad" is this? "Nude with attitude" feature an African-American woman in a powerful pose, completely undercut by the brevity of her dress and the focus on her long legs. Her "attitude" is nothing to fear—she's just another sex object. Good thing, given the fear many people have of powerful African-American women.



HALSTON'S SUEK REPERFUMING

SHIRAZ



The British ad "For girls with plenty of balls" is insulting in ways too numerous to count, beginning with the equation of strength and courage and fiery passion with testicles. What this ad offers girls is body lotion.

Some ads do feature women who seem really angry and rebellious, but the final message is always the same. "Today, I indulge my dark side," says an ad featuring a fierce young woman tearing at what seems to be a net. "Got a problem with that?" The slogan is "Be extraordinary not ordinary."

The product that promises to free this girl from the net that imprisons her? Black nail polish.



Nail polish. Such a trivial solution to such an enormous dilemma. But such triviality and superficiality is common in advertising. How could it be otherwise? The solution to any problem always has to be a product. Change, transformation, is thus inevitably shallow and moronic, rather than meaningful and transcendent. These days, self-improvement seems to have more to do with calories than with character, with abdomens than with absolutes, with nail polish than with ethics.

It has not always been so. Joan Jacobs Brumberg describes this vividly in *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*:

When girls in the nineteenth century thought about ways to improve themselves, they almost always focused on their internal character and how it was reflected in outward behavior. In 1892, the personal agenda of an adolescent diarist read: "Resolved, not to talk about myself or feelings. To think before speaking. To work seriously.... To be dignified. Interest myself more in others."

A century later, in the 1990s, American girls think very differently. In a New Year's resolution written in 1982, a girl wrote: "I will try to make myself better in every way I possibly can with the help of my budget and baby-sitting money. I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got new haircut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories."

Not that girls didn't have plenty of problems in the nineteenth century. But surely by now we should have come much further. This relentless trivialization of a girl's hopes and dreams, her expectations for herself, cuts to the quick of her soul. Just as she is entering womanhood, eager to spread her wings, to become truly sexually active, empowered, independent—the culture moves in to *cut her down to size*.

Black nail polish isn't going to help. But it probably won't hurt either. What hurts are some of the other products offered to girls as a way to rebel and to cope—especially our deadliest drugs, alcohol and nicotine. These drugs are cynically and deliberately offered by advertisers to girls as a way to numb the pain of disconnection, to maintain the illusion of some kind of relationship, to be more appealing to men, to be both "liberated" and "feminine," and, perhaps most tragically, to subvert their rebellious spirits, the very spark within that could, if not co-opted, empower them to change their lives.