KEY POINTS

The Advertising Environment

- Jean Kilbourne started collecting ads in the late 1960s, inspired, in part, by her involvement with the women’s movement, her interest in media, and her experiences as a model.

- Kilbourne started to see a pattern in the ads – a kind of statement about what it meant to be a woman in American culture.

- Over the past 40 years, despite the gains of the women’s movement, Kilbourne believes advertising’s image of women has only gotten worse.

- Advertising is a $250 billion a year industry in the United States.

- The average American is exposed to over 3,000 ads every single day and will spend two years of his or her life watching television commercials.

- Ads are everywhere: schools, buildings, sports stadiums, billboards, bus stops, buses, cars, elevators, medical offices, airplanes, food, etc.

- Many people feel personally exempt from the influence of advertising.

- According to the editor in chief of Advertising Age, the major publication of the advertising industry, “Only 8% of an ad’s message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is worked and reworked deep within the recesses of the brain.”

- Ads create an environment. Just as it’s difficult to be healthy in a toxic physical environment, if we’re breathing poisoned air or drinking polluted water, it’s difficult to be healthy in a “toxic cultural environment” that surrounds us with unhealthy images and constantly sacrifices our health and well-being for the sake of profit.

- Ads sell more than products. They sell values, images, and concepts of love, sexuality, success, and normalcy. They tell us who we are and who we should be.

Advertising and Objectification

- Advertising tells women that what’s most important is how they look, and ads surround us with the image of ideal female beauty. However, this flawlessness cannot be achieved. It’s a look that’s been created through airbrushing, cosmetics, and computer retouching.

- You almost never see a photograph of a woman considered beautiful that hasn’t been Photoshopped.

- Women of color are generally considered beautiful only if they approximate the white ideal: light skin, straight hair, and Caucasian features.

- Black women are often featured in jungle settings wearing leopard skins as if they were exotic animals.

- In all kinds of advertising, women’s bodies are turned into “things” and “objects.” Kilbourne believes this objectification creates a climate in which there is widespread violence against women.
- Women's bodies are often dismembered in ads. Just one part of the body — often breasts — is focused on.

- There has been a dramatic increase in recent years in the amount of cosmetic procedures:
  - 91% of all cosmetic procedures are performed on women
  - From 1997 to 2007, these procedures, overall, rose 457% to almost 12 million per year
  - Over the same period, there has been an increase of 754% in non-surgical procedures like Botox and laser treatments
  - And an increase of 114% in actual surgeries, like breast implants, liposuction, and eyelid surgery. There are now more than two million of these a year.

- Men basically don't live in a world in which their bodies are routinely scrutinized, criticized, and judged — whereas women and girls do.

- We're told that women are acceptable only if they're young, thin, white — or at least light-skinned — perfectly groomed and polished, plucked and shaved. And any deviation from this ideal is met with a lot of contempt and hostility.

**Advertising and the Cult of Thinness**

- Pop culture delights in ridiculing and mocking celebrities who've gained weight.

- The obsession with thinness is about cutting girls down to size — to aspire to become nothing.

- Yesterday's sex symbols would be considered fat by today's standards.

- Models keep getting thinner and thinner. If they are not thin enough, Photoshop is used to make them appear thinner.

- The body type that we see in advertisements as acceptable or desirable is one that fewer than 5% of American women have.

- Some ads today seem to encourage unhealthy attitudes — even eating disorders.

- Academy Award winner Kate Winslet has been outspoken about her refusal to allow Hollywood to dictate her weight. When British GQ magazine digitally enhanced her photograph to make her look thinner, she issued a statement saying, "I don't look like that, and, more importantly, I don't desire to look like that. I can tell you they've reduced the size of my legs by about a third."

- Women are bombarded with ads for products that promise weight loss. However, diet products are often dangerous, and at best they do not work. 95% of dieters not only regain whatever weight they lose within five years, they go on to gain more.

- Obesity is a major public health problem: 1/3 of Americans are obese, and 2/3 are overweight.

- We need to transform our attitudes as a culture about food and about the way we eat, but that's very difficult to do in a culture that teaches all of us to hate our bodies.

- Women have been made to feel ashamed of eating. And the more guilty women are made to feel about eating, the more erotic the ads for food become.

- Anne Becker's famous study found a sharp rise in eating disorders among young women in Fiji soon after the introduction of television to the culture.
Advertising and Sexual Pathology

- Girls are often pictured in ads with their hands over their mouths. Their body language is usually passive, vulnerable, and very different from the body language of boys and men.
- Women are told that it's sexy to be like a little girl.
- The sexualization of little girls has become much more extreme. For example, padded bras and thongs for seven-year-olds are now sold in major department stores.
- The United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy, and the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases by far, in the developed world.
- Images that used to belong to the world of pornography are now commonplace.
- Sex in advertising is relentlessly heterosexist. Gay men barely exist outside of publications targeting them, and the portrayal of lesbians comes straight from the world of porn.
- The Internet has given everyone easy access to pornography.
- As girls learn from a very early age that their sexualized behavior and appearance are often rewarded by society, they’re encouraged to see this as their own choice – as a declaration of empowerment.
- Kilbourne wants to be very clear that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be attractive and sexy. What’s wrong, she says, is that this is emphasized for girls and women to the exclusion of other important qualities and aspects.
- Being “hot” has become the most important measure of success. This extremely superficial and limited definition of sexiness makes most women feel insecure, vulnerable, and much less sexy.
- In 2007, the American Psychological Association released a report concluding that girls exposed to sexualized images from a young age are more prone to depression, eating disorders, and low self-esteem.
- Girls are constantly given the mixed message by popular culture that they should be sexy but innocent, experienced but virginal.

Beyond Advertising, Consumerism & Violence

- Advertisers always find ways to turn any movement for radical change into just another way to push a product. For example, feminism as individual self-expression is more likely to sell Botox than change the world.
- Sexual images in advertisements aren’t intended to sell us on sex. They’re designed to promote shopping and consumerism. Not only are people objectified in ads, but also products are sexualized.
- Another thing that has changed dramatically over the years has been the increase in ads that objectify men. They’re generally bigger, stronger, and more powerful than women.
- Masculinity is often linked with violence. Boys grow up in a world where men are constantly shown as perpetrators of brutal violence, encouraging toughness and insensitivity.
• The negative and distorted image of women deeply affects not only how men feel about women, but also how men feel about everything that gets labeled feminine by the culture — qualities like compassion, cooperation, empathy, intuition, and sensitivity.

• Human beings should share the whole range of human qualities — strong and gentle, logical and intuitive, powerful and nurturing — and not be told one sex can have only one set of human qualities and one sex only the other.

• Violent images make some people more aggressive, they desensitize just about everybody, and they make most people more likely to blame the victim.

• The most dangerous image is one that eroticizes violence. Many ads feature women in bondage, battered, or even murdered.

• Battering is the single greatest cause of injury to women in America.

• One-third of all the women who are murdered in our country are killed by their male partners.

• Most men are not violent, but many men are afraid to speak out against it.

• The obsession with thinness, the tyranny of the ideal image of beauty, and violence against women are all public health problems that affect us all.

• Kilbourne believes we need a lot of citizen activism, education, discussion, and media literacy, and we need to work together to change norms and attitudes. We need to think of ourselves as citizens rather than primarily as consumers.