

**MEDIA EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION  
STUDY GUIDE**

**Killing Us Softly 4  
Advertising's Image of Women**

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## CONTENTS

Note to Educators _____	3
Program Overview _____	3
Pre-viewing Questions for Discussion & Writing _____	4
Key Points _____	5
Post-viewing Questions for Discussion & Writing _____	9
Assignments _____	11
Semester-Long Project _____	14

For additional assignments, please download the *Killing Us Softly 3* study guide:  
[http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/206/studyguide\\_206.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/206/studyguide_206.pdf)

For handouts associated with the *Killing Us Softly 3* study guide, also download:  
[http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/206/studyguidehandout\\_206.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/206/studyguidehandout_206.pdf)

## NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds:

**Key Points** provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

**Questions for Discussion & Writing** encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

**Assignments** encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In this newest update of her pioneering *Killing Us Softly* series, the first in more than a decade, Jean Kilbourne takes a fresh look at how advertising traffics in distorted and destructive ideals of femininity. The film marshals a range of new print and television advertisements to lay bare a stunning pattern of damaging gender stereotypes – images and messages that too often reinforce unrealistic, and unhealthy, perceptions of beauty, perfection, and sexuality. *Killing Us Softly 4* challenges students to take advertising seriously, and to think critically about popular culture and its relationship to sexism, eating disorders, and gender violence.

To download a folder of JPEG images used in *Killing Us Softly 4*, click the following link:  
[http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/KUS4\\_Images.zip](http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/KUS4_Images.zip)

## PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Do you watch television, listen to the radio or read magazines? If so, why, when, and how often? Which television shows do you watch? Which radio stations do you listen to? Which magazines do you read?
2. How many advertisements do you think you see and hear every day? Where do you see and hear advertisements? Think of as many places as possible. What makes an advertisement stay in your memory? Images? Music? Words? Phrases?
3. What personal care and beauty products do you use on a regular basis? What other products do you use? What brand names are you wearing, carrying, or using right now? What other brand names do you have at home? How do you feel when you use these products? Can you feel this way without these products? Would using different brands of the same beauty products feel different to you? Why or why not?
4. Do you think advertising influences the kinds of products you buy? If yes, how? If no, explain why you think you're able to resist it.
5. What is feminism? What are some common stereotypes about feminists and feminism? Where do you think these stereotypes come from? Do you think these stereotypes can work to discredit the ideas behind feminism? Can you think of other social movements where people were labeled in ways that deflected attention away from the actual issues being addressed?
6. In your view, what does it mean to be a "strong" woman? Are strong women always feminists? Explain your reasoning. What terms are often used for women who voice strong opinions? How might these terms serve to keep girls and women from voicing their opinions?
7. What does it mean to be feminine, as opposed to masculine? How would you define femininity?
8. What are some typical expectations of women in our culture? Where do these expectations come from? How fair or accurate do you think they are? And how do they compare with our expectations of men?

## 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.

## POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How does American culture define “femininity” and “masculinity?” Are these definitions universal, or do masculine and feminine ideals vary from place to place and over time?
2. Do you feel that our ideals of femininity and masculinity are learned or natural? Why?
3. Can people, whether female or male, have both “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics? Do you see a danger in limiting people to one or the other?
4. What are some stereotypical stories media tell about women? What are some stereotypical stories media tell about men? Give some examples of each. What patterns of difference do you see between these two kinds of typical narratives?
5. What sorts of products are sold using images of women and femininity? What kinds of products are sold using images of men and masculinity? Are these ever switched around? If so, when?
6. How is success usually portrayed in advertisements? Give some specific examples. Are there forms of success that advertisements seem to leave out? What are they? Why do you think they’re not as common in ads as other kinds of success?
7. How is happiness portrayed in advertisements? Be specific about the kinds of happiness that ads typically appeal to, or put on display. And talk about what these ads seem to be saying is the secret to this kind of happiness.
8. What are some differences between ads that feature white people and ads that feature people of color?
9. What kinds of products are sold using sexuality? Why do you think advertisers would use sex to sell their goods? How does this work, anyway? What does it mean when people say sex sells?
10. What is advertising’s basic role in a capitalist society? What’s its function in relation to the system as a whole? How does this relationship affect the way people, and human values, are constructed in ads?
11. What does it mean to be a citizen? What does it mean to be a consumer? Can a person be both a citizen and a consumer? How?
12. How do the messages in advertising counter or undermine social change?
13. What is responsible advertising? Do advertisers have a responsibility to society? Do they have a responsibility to children? Why or why not?
14. How would you describe Jean Kilbourne’s point of view of women in advertising, overall? Can you think of other ways to look at the role of women in advertising that might contradict her central argument? What sort of reasoning might lead to a defense of how women are portrayed in advertising? What’s your own take?
15. In what ways is transformation a central principle of American society? Where in American history and culture does this belief reveal itself? What is the connection between advertising’s impossible image of ideal beauty and the American belief in transformation?
16. Do you feel that the media *reflect* or *create* the ideal image of beauty in our society? Or do you think it’s a bit of both? Explain what you mean.

17. What are some of the potential physical, emotional, and mental effects on girls and women who try to live up to our culture's ideal image of beauty? What relationship does Kilbourne see between cultural ideals of thinness and the cultural obsession with both dieting and eating disorders? What do you make of this connection?
18. How and why – specifically – do you feel individuals are susceptible to media influence?
19. What is the relationship between dehumanization, objectification, and violence?
20. Why do some people consider “feminist” a negative label? Why do some women resist being labeled feminists? In what ways does disavowing feminism keep women from accessing power and autonomy?
21. Do you think there is a link between advertising's co-optation and trivialization of feminism and the resistance of many young women to being identified as feminists? If so, what is it? If not, why not?
22. What current images in the popular media work against the image of the passive, vulnerable woman? How are these images different from the story traditionally told by advertisers? What other images might allow for a more diversified understanding of femininity?
23. Do you feel that the culture is opening up, that is has started to embrace women and girls that go against the traditional feminine type? If so, give some examples and explain why you think this is happening? If not, why not?
24. Do you think that the work of the women's movement is done, for the most part, or do you think there is more for it to do? Be specific.
25. Should men be more concerned about women's freedom, health, and equality, or about how the fight for these things might undermine their own position in society?
26. What role can girls and women play in diversifying the image of what it means to be a woman in our culture? What role can boys and men play?
27. What can girls and women do to prevent male violence against women? What can boys and men do? Are there things you think that men can do more effectively on this front than women? Explain.
28. There are many advertisements for beauty products that claim to help women look young. What effect do you think this has on the way that women feel about themselves as they age? What effect do you think this has on the value our culture gives to older women? To youth?
29. In what ways do images of thinness and advertisements for food contradict each other in the media? How might their combined effects lead to disordered eating?
30. Advertisements that objectify men have increased dramatically in recent years. Although objectification doesn't have the same violent consequences for men that it has for women, there have been recent studies that show that the objectification of men is beginning to take a toll on men's self-esteem. More men are reporting dissatisfaction with their bodies, and eating disorders among men are on the rise. In what ways might the objectification of men in advertisements be affecting how men feel about their own bodies?

## ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a story inspired by the following question: What does it mean to be a woman in our culture? The story doesn't have to be based on personal experience (although it can be), but it should be realistic.
  
2. Look through popular magazines, and see if you can find advertisements that objectify women in order to sell a product. Study these images, then write a paper about objectification that deals with all or some of the following:
  - What effect(s), if any, do you think the objectification of women's bodies has on the culture?
  - Jean Kilbourne states "turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step toward justifying violence against that person." What do you think she means by this? Do you agree with her reasoning? Why or why not?
  - Some people would argue that depicting a woman's body as an object is a form of art. What is your opinion of this point of view? Explain your reasoning.
  - Why do you think that women are objectified more often than men are?
  - Kilbourne explains that the consequences of being objectified are different – and more serious – for women than for men. Do you agree? How is the world different for women than it is for men? How do objectified images of women interact with those in our culture differently from the way images of men do? Why is it important to look at images in the context of the culture?

Throughout your written analysis, be sure to make clear and specific reference to the images you selected, and please submit these images with your paper.

3. Watch an hour of primetime television and record what commercials, music videos, or shows come on. As you watch, count and record how many thin and non-thin women you see. In addition, make a chart of the clothes worn and roles played by the thin women versus the non-thin women. Then write responses to each of the following:
  - What did you notice about the differences between how thin women were portrayed on television versus the way non-thin women were portrayed? Do you think these portrayals have the power to shape how young girls and women see themselves and others? How so? How about the way that young boys and men see girls and women?
  - Eating disorder specialists cite the influence of the media as one influential factor in the development of eating disorders among young women. In what ways do you think the media supports eating-disordered attitudes and behaviors? Draw on Kilbourne's analysis in *Killing us Softly 4* to support and illustrate your own points.

4. Find an example where a young woman, or a girl, is sexualized in an advertisement. Then respond to each of the following:
  - What message does this image send to young girls about sex?
  - What message does this image send to young boys about sex?
  - What do you think it says to older men?
  - How do you think Jean Kilbourne would break down and analyze this ad?
  
5. Advertisements for beauty products frequently claim that women can defy the normal and natural aging process and seemingly look young forever. Find two or three ads for products that claim to fight the signs of aging. Then respond to each of the following:
  - What point of view do these ads seem to have toward age and beauty? How is this point of view conveyed, specifically, in each?
  - Do you think advertising has *created* the idea that youth and beauty are synonymous? Or do you think it simply *reflects* this cultural attitude? Explain what you see as the difference, and why it matters.
  - Do you see signs of this attitude toward aging in other parts of the culture? If so, give some examples.
  - Do you think this is a universal attitude? Or do you think different cultures might take different views of the aging process? How about within our own culture: do you think it's possible that our attitudes toward aging have changed over time?
  - And finally, how do you think the attitude toward aging reflected in these ads might reinforce larger values and cultural attitudes in contemporary American society? In other words, do you think our views of aging and beauty might reinforce ideas and ideals that go beyond simply skin?

6. Read Sandra Cisneros' short story "Woman Hollering Creek":  
<http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/WomanHolleringCreek.zip>

Then read this document on domestic violence:

[http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/Domestic\\_Violence\\_and\\_Abuse.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/Domestic_Violence_and_Abuse.pdf)

Then respond to each of the following:

- What parallels do you see between the story and the information presented in the document?
- Cleofilas watches a lot of telenovellas. In what ways do these shows seem to influence her? In what ways do the messages she seems to be getting from media make it difficult for Cleofilas to leave her abusive relationship?
- What's your take on the relationship between the kinds of media we watch and how we navigate our relationships? Do you think the values and messages we absorb from media – including advertising – might contribute in any way to the difficulties women often have leaving abusive relationships? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
- What specific lines of argument and analysis from *Killing Us Softly 4* might help us understand this story on a deeper level?

7. Below are three different points of view of scars:

- “Scars remind us that our past is real.”
  - Duena Alfonsa, *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy
- “We are our injuries as much as we are our successes.”
  - Adah, *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingslover
- “A scar is no one’s idea of attractive.”
  - Neosporin advertisement

Create an imaginary dialogue between the marketing director of Neosporin and these two fictional characters – Duena Alfonsa and Adah. Write freely, trying to capture what these characters might have to say to some of our perfection-obsessed ad executives today.

8. Read Joyce Carol Oates’ short story, “Where are you going? Where have you been?”: <http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/WhereAreYouGoingWhereHaveYouBeen.pdf>

Write a paper exploring any connections you see between the themes of this story and Kilbourne’s analysis in *Killing Us Softly 4*.

9. Watch one of the following movies: *Thelma and Louise*, *Notting Hill*, *Ever After*, *Miss Congeniality*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Transamerica*, or *Brokeback Mountain*. Write an analysis of the movie that draws on some of Kilbourne’s insights about gender in *Killing Us Softly 4*. Make sure your analysis addresses the following questions:

- In what ways does the director conform to gender stereotypes to create the characters?
- In what ways does the director challenge gender stereotypes to create the characters?
- Ultimately, what do you think this movie is saying about gender norms, and their relationship to power, in American society?

10. Numerous popular songs have explored what it means to be a girl or a woman in our culture. Some examples are Jewel’s “I’m Sensitive” and No Doubt’s “Just a Girl.” Find a song, yourself, that you feel does a good job exploring female identity, and write a paper explaining what you think the song is saying. Try to draw on relevant points from *Killing Us Softly 4* to support and illustrate your interpretation of the song. And be sure to print out and submit the lyrics of the song with your paper.

## SEMESTER-LONG PROJECT

Create and design a magazine about the relationship between gender and a subject matter of your choice that is guided by Jean Kilbourne's vision. First, define and formulate your mission:

- Choose a subject (sports, fashion, parenting, etc.) and an audience (tweens, adult women, high school men, etc.)
- Give your magazine a catchy name.
- Regardless of the subject you choose – and you can choose anything – identify the basic themes and messages you want to convey about gender -- about masculinity, femininity, what it means to be a man, a woman, a girl, a boy, etc.
- Identify the fundamental assumptions and values that underlie the messages you want to send about gender in American society.
- Based on these assumptions, write up a set of basic principles that will guide all editorial decisions you make about the content of your magazine and the kinds of ideas and ideals your magazine will convey about gender.

Then, put the magazine together:

- Write and/or collect articles and visual images related to your chosen subject matter that are in keeping with your mission. The basic goal here is to include a combination of your own writing and articles and images from other sources (for example, interesting and relevant articles and photos and illustrations and other forms of art you find online). While these pieces will obviously focus on your chosen subject (for example, sports or politics), the angle of everything contained in your magazine should be about how gender issues intersect with this subject. Note: At least half of the content should be written by you.
- Design advertisements. Your ads should be completely original creations. You will write the copy, and create the visuals yourself. This means you'll use your own photographs or compose your own illustrations, and that you'll create the slogans, write all the text that appears in the ads, and develop the overall sales hook on your own. You can devise advertisements for already existing products and brands, or you can make up your own brands.

After creating your magazine, write up an assessment of the finished product that responds to each of the following:

- What overall message about gender did you want to convey with the articles you selected and wrote? In the end, how successful do you think you were in conveying this overall message? Explain yourself as fully as possible, with specific reference to the content of your magazine.
- How about the advertisements you created? What was your thinking with them, and how effective do you think they were in capturing and conveying your overall message?
- What did you learn throughout the process of creating this magazine?
- What do you think your magazine says, overall, about media and media representations in America?