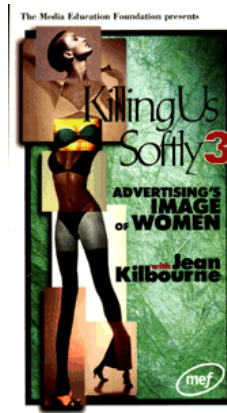




## **Viewing guide for *Killing Us Softly 3***

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Trinity University, December 2006



## ***Killing Us Softly III- Pre-viewing Guide***

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### **1. Overview/ Introduction**

The documentary film, *Killing Us Softly III* (Kilbourne, 2000) examines advertisement's portrayal of women in America. Scholar and lecturer, Jean Kilbourne has researched many topics that affect America's society and culture. Her works include, *Spin the Bottle: Sex, Lies and Alcohol*, which explores the role of alcohol in college life, *Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol and Tobacco*, which exposes marketing strategies used by tobacco and alcohol industries to keep Americans hooked on their products, *Pack Of Lies: The Advertisement of Tobacco*, *The Killing Screen: Media and the Culture of Violence*, which explores the role of violence in the media, *Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness*, which offers an analysis of how female bodies are depicted in advertising and its effects on women's health, and finally the *Killing Us Softly* trilogy.

Kilbourne found that Americans are bombarded with an average of 3,000 advertisements per day and that the average human being will spend three years of their life watching advertisements. With these staggering statistics, it is hard to believe that people still feel personally exempt from the influence of advertisement. The Foundation of Mass Media says that advertisements sell products, images and concepts of normalcy. They tell us who we *should* be.

Kilbourne began her research of advertisement's influence on women in 1978 with her break through documentary, *Killing Us Softly*, and then followed up with a second documentary film, *Still Killing Us Softly* in 1987. In the 1970's she began collecting advertisements that she felt objectified women. She came to the conclusion, after covering her entire refrigerator with inflammatory advertisements that women take on powerful yet unfulfilling roles in advertisements. Twenty years later, Kilbourne realizes that the basic message still has not changed.

The viewing guide for the documentary film, *Killing Us Softly III* (Kilbourne, 2000), was created by Alexandra Sedeno as part of "Communication 3325: Documentary Film" at Trinity University in Fall 2006.

Kilbourne argues that advertisements can demean women through three distinct portrayals. One view is that women are depicted as objects. Their bodies lose value and can become equal to something as meaningless as a pair of scissors. Another view shows women depicted as animals, especially women of color. Because of this, they are seen as inferior human beings and thus reinforcing the concept of “otherness”. A final view is that women are depicted as suitable subjects for male violence.

Kilbourne’s research points to the fact that American culture and society needs to recognize that no one is personally exempt from the influence of advertisements. She also calls attention to the fact that advertisement’s depiction of women are dangerous to female perceptions and self-esteem. *Killing Us Softly III*, covers advertisement’s portrayal of women and calls for individuals to recognize the perils of the current state of negative portrayals of women in advertisements.

## **2. Questions to keep in mind before watching the movie**

- How do advertisements portray women as opposed to how they portray men?
- What underlying messages about American culture and society do advertisements suggest? Is it positive or negative?
- Do advertisements influence young girls and their own perception of themselves?
- Are advertisements in America too sexy? violent?

## **3. Where to obtain copies of this film**

- The Media Education Foundation: **HYPERLINK "http://www.mediaed.org"**  
[www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)
- The California News Reel: **HYPERLINK "http://www.newsreel.com"**  
[www.newsreel.com](http://www.newsreel.com)
- The Community Media Center – Grand Rapids, Michigan: **HYPERLINK "http://www.grcmc.org"** <http://www.grcmc.org>

## ***Killing Us Softly III*- Post-viewing guide**

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## 1. Overview

This post-viewing guide is intended to deepen the audience's critical engagement with the documentary film, *Killing Us Softly III*. It is targeted at women and men between the ages of 15-30 who are bombarded with advertisements every day. Possible ways that the guide might be used include: recognition *of* to the role of advertisement in American society and culture, research projects aimed at exploring discrimination against women and/or the role of advertisement in America, and finally, for pure reasons of interest.

Kilbourne says that advertisements give the message that what is most important is how we look. We must spend time, energy and money on our outward appearance or else we are failures. Advertisements say that we can look a certain way if we try hard enough. However, the fact of the matter is that we all fail because there is no such thing as perfection. It is this kind of powerful message that influences self esteem and also men's perceptions on acceptable ways of treating women.

Kilbourne argues that advertisements treat women as though they are objects. Advertisements have turned women's bodies into objects such as beer cans and scissors. This method of turning a woman into a thing can be violence. She also states that advertisements portray women as not being fully human. For example, in many advertisements, only one part of the body is focused on, such as the rear, legs or breasts.

Men do not live in a world where their bodies are scrutinized; only women do. Kilbourne asserts that five percent of women have the 'ideal' body type that advertisements portray. However, this is the only body type that we ever see. She also shares the statistic that one in five women has an eating disorder. Advertisements are significant contributors to the intense pressure women feel to fit a category that only five percent actually occupy. One advertisement shared by Kilbourne is for Armani Exchange which reads, "The more you subtract, the more you add." This statement implies that the less of you there is the more attention you will attract.

Women are cut down to size and silenced. They are also shown as passive and vulnerable in their body language. This asserts a message of power which is almost always masculine in advertisements. Advertisements establish the idea within American culture that women must be innocent yet sexy and virginal yet experienced. This has had repercussions in the past. For example, the sexualization of little girls in advertisements has occurred in real life with the Jon Benet Ramsey murder. Calvin Klein even ran advertisements that were reminiscent of child pornography.

Sex and violence in advertisements also go hand in hand. Heterosexual sex is sold; there is no emphasis on relationships. Bondage in advertisements has turned pornography into the mainstream. There is also the common idea shared in advertisements that women want to be violated and that they are actually asking for forceful sex.

To be partial, Kilbourne says that there is an increase in men objectification in advertisements. However, men are never raped, harassed or beaten in these advertisements. She also establishes that there are some positive advertisements in distribution. She stresses the fact that advertisements keep us trapped and emphasizes the need for drastic change. We are citizens first and then consumers and advertisements effect us all whether we are conscious of it or not. As humans, we have the ability to choose freely. Kilbourne contends that advertisements should be received with both an open mind and a level of awareness.

## 2. Useful resources

### a. Related resources about the advertisement industry

*Advertising Age* ( HYPERLINK "<http://www.adage.com/latestnews>" <http://www.adage.com/latestnews> )

This online edition of the magazine, *Advertising Age*, shares articles relating to current advertisements and the state of the industry. It also shares names of who is who in the advertising world.

*The Advertising Industry's Process of Voluntary Self-Regulation* ( HYPERLINK "[http://www.nadreview.org/05\\_Procedures.pdf](http://www.nadreview.org/05_Procedures.pdf)" [http://www.nadreview.org/05\\_Procedures.pdf](http://www.nadreview.org/05_Procedures.pdf) )

This report compiled by The National Advertising Review Council (NARC) shares policies and procedures which guide American advertisements. It also tells how to formally give a complaint on an advertisement.

*American Advertising: A Brief History* ( HYPERLINK "<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Ads/amadv.html>" <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Ads/amadv.html> )

This website compiled by researchers at George Mason University gives the history of advertising in America. It answers questions such as, what ads try to do, their intended audience and the strategies used in ads to sell products.

### b. Related resources about the role of women in advertisements

*Images of women's sexuality in advertisements: a content analysis of Black- and White-oriented women's and men's magazines* ( HYPERLINK "http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\_m2294/is\_1-2\_52/ai\_n13651290"

[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2294/is\\_1-2\\_52/ai\\_n13651290](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2294/is_1-2_52/ai_n13651290) )

This article shares the role of women in advertisements and their portrayal to fit certain stereotypes. The author also goes into detail about how advertisements construct masculine and feminine ideals.

*The Power of the Gaze: The Stereotypical Image of Women in Advertisements* ( HYPERLINK

"http://www.msu.edu/~rachoza/Portfolio/The%20Power%20of%20the%20Gaze.pdf"

<http://www.msu.edu/~rachoza/Portfolio/The%20Power%20of%20the%20Gaze.pdf> )

This article written by student, Jessica Rachoza, compares women in advertisements from the 1950's to today. She argues that although women may be seen as stronger than before, their bodies have become objects of exploitation. She also says that today's women are under the power of the male gaze.

*Sexist Advertisements: How to see through the soft-sell* ( HYPERLINK "http://www.medialit.org/reading\_room/article41.html"

[http://www.medialit.org/reading\\_room/article41.html](http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/article41.html) )

This article, compiled by the Center for Media Literacy, shares some of the more subtle ways advertising reinforces cultural values of subservience, domination and inequality between the sexes.

### c. Related resources about the documentary film genre

*Documentary Films* ( HYPERLINK

"http://www.filmsite.org/docfilms.html"

<http://www.filmsite.org/docfilms.html> )

This website shares a short history of documentary films, different popular topics used in documentaries (such as war documentaries or music-related documentaries), famous documentary film makers and finally a selection of popular documentary films.

*Current Titles In: Sex Role Stereotypes* ( HYPERLINK

"http://www.sa.psu.edu/cws/collections/videos/sexrole.html"

<http://www.sa.psu.edu/cws/collections/videos/sexrole.html> )

This film offers a selection of documentaries that deal with common stereotypes of men and women. Among the titles included are, *Hollywood's Smoke & Mirrors: Women's Health at Risk*, and *Dreamworlds: Desire/Sex/Power in Rock Video*

**d. Glossaries of useful film terms**

*Eating Disorders* ( [HYPERLINK](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/eatingdisorders.html)  
"http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/eatingdisorders.html"  
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/eatingdisorders.html> )

This website from Medline Plus, offers the latest news on eating disorders, symptoms, prevention tips and treatment advice. It also defines different terms associated with eating disorders.

*Childhood exposure to media violence* ( [HYPERLINK](http://www.apa.org/releases/media_violence.html)  
"http://www.apa.org/releases/media\_violence.html"  
[http://www.apa.org/releases/media\\_violence.html](http://www.apa.org/releases/media_violence.html) )

This article from the American Psychological Association Press Releases states that children who identify with aggressive TV characters and perceive the violence to be realistic are most at risk for later aggression.

*Media's New Mood: Sexual Violence* ( [HYPERLINK](http://www.centerformedia literacy.org/reading_room/article443.html)  
"http://www.centerformedia literacy.org/reading\_room/article443.html"  
[http://www.centerformedia literacy.org/reading\\_room/article443.html](http://www.centerformedia literacy.org/reading_room/article443.html) )

This article asks whether or not aggression and eroticism in the media is creating a climate in which sexual violence is more acceptable in real life. The article features an interview from Neil Malamuth, associate professor and chairman of the Department of Communication Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. He co-edited the book, *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*.

**e. Film reviews**

*Killing Us Softly III Film Summary* ( [HYPERLINK](http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderAndDiversity/KillingUsSoftly3/studyguide/html)  
"http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderAndDiversity/KillingUsSoftly3/studyguide/html"  
<http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderAndDiversity/KillingUsSoftly3/studyguide/html> )

This website offers and full synopsis and key points related to *Killing Us Softly III* as well as listing themes in *Killing Us Softly III* including,

objectification, the obsession with thinness, silencing, the trivialization of power, the sexualization of teenagers, and violence against women.

*Beyond Killing Us Softly: the Strength to Resist* ( [HYPERLINK "http://gstudies.asp.radford.edu/conferences/conf01/film01.htm" http://gstudies.asp.radford.edu/conferences/conf01/film01.htm](http://gstudies.asp.radford.edu/conferences/conf01/film01.htm) )

This review offers quotes from different individuals who viewed the film. One loved it and the other enjoyed hearing how the documentary implies what can be done in order to rectify the problem.

Post your response to "*Killing Us Softly*" here ( [HYPERLINK "http://instructors.cwrl.utexas.edu/shetty/?q=node/15" http://instructors.cwrl.utexas.edu/shetty/?q=node/15](http://instructors.cwrl.utexas.edu/shetty/?q=node/15) )

This website offers reviews from students enrolled in a Rhetoric and Writing class at the University of Texas in Austin who watched the movie and were asked to blog their reactions.

#### **f. Scholarly treatments of the film**

*Video Summary of Killing Us Softly III* ( [HYPERLINK "http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderAndDiversity/KillingUsSoftly3/studyguide/html" http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderAndDiversity/KillingUsSoftly3/studyguide/html](http://www.mediaed.org/videos/MediaGenderAndDiversity/KillingUsSoftly3/studyguide/html) )

This summary also gives the author's review and interpretation of the film. The author also compiles advertisements outside of the film and examines those in relation to points made in *Killing Us Softly III*.

*Patricia H. Hinchey, A Crash Course in Media Literacy*

The author gives a short review of the documentary film's content and asserts that Kilbourne has written the book on media portrayal of women. She also references the follow up to this documentary, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*.

*David Goetzl, Teen Girls Pan Ad Images of Women*

This author shows the results from a survey of the Advertising Women of New York. The results show that 75 percent of girls are insulted from women in advertisements. This affirms that Teen-age girls aren't too young to be persuaded negatively by advertisements with images of shapely bodies.

### **3. Video-clip analysis**

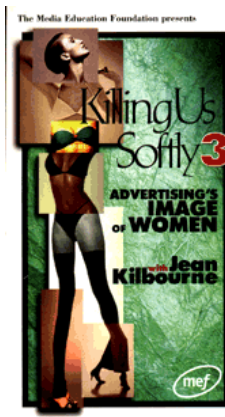


### a. Explanation and set-up

This video clip is a compilation of short excerpts from the documentary film, *Killing Us Softly III*. Jean Kilbourne has a lecture-style documentary which showcases women in advertising while displaying American advertisements to support her ideas.

This clip hits the main points argued by Jean Kilbourne which include statistics on the advertising industry, the pressure for women to be perfect, the objectification of women in advertisements, information on eating disorders and its connection with Advertising in America, teenage hyper sexuality, and violence towards women in advertisements. This video clip was found on YouTube.

### b. Link to the video clip



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpyGwP3yzE>

### c. Analysis

This video clip summarizes the main points of the documentary film, *Killing Us Softly III*. It takes a more recent view of advertising's negative portrayal and impact on American society and culture. It begins with statistics on the advertising industry. It shares that in 1979, advertising companies spent an estimated \$20 billion in advertising while in 1999 advertising companies spent an estimated \$180 billion in advertising; the rise is absolutely significant. Advertising companies even brag about the ability to bombard the public with advertisements. For example, one advertisement stresses that they are "in your face and all over the place".

Next, the clip progresses to discuss the pressure women feel to be beautiful. If a specific type of beauty (young, white, thin...) is not obtained then the message it gives is that you are not worthy or valuable. One advertisement showed in the clip to emphasize this idea is of an older woman who has wrinkles. The caption reads, "You never thought you'd lose your looks either."

A main point in the clip is that of women being objectified in advertisements. Often only one part of the body is emphasized so not only is a woman 'a thing' but only one part of that thing is focused on. Breasts, for example, are used to sell any and everything. One advertisement for a brand of fishing line shows a ripped bra being held by the fishing line. It reads, "The most dependable fishing line in the world."

Teenagers are often hyper-sexualized. In one advertisement there is a young, thin girl looking at her reflection in a window and imagining she is wearing sexy black lace. Violence is also normalized and trivialized. Advertisements often show women who look beaten with dark under eye circles dementedly thinking the advertisement is humorous.

Finally, at the end of the clip, Jean Kilbourne says that what is most at stake to boys, girls, women and men is the ability to have freely chosen lives; something that advertisers try to manipulate through the negative messages in advertisements.

#### **4. Discussion Questions**

- What makes an advertisement remain in your memory? (images? words? music? phrases?)
- According to American culture, what is the definition of "femininity" and "masculinity"? Do other cultures consider different characteristics "feminine" or "masculine"?
- What products are sold by images of women? Of men? Or people of color?
- What does it mean to be a conscious consumer?
- How does advertising shape American values, ethics, morals and responsibilities? Should it change?
- Who might have a different point of view than Jean Kilbourne on the perception of women in advertising and what would be the reasoning?

#### **5. Closing Thoughts**

It can be concluded that today advertisements portray women in an extremely dangerous and unfavorable light. Women are used as objects, animals and are suitable to subjection for male violence. These kinds of portrayals can be embarrassing and devaluing to the female self perception. At the end of *Killing Us Softly III*, Jean Kilbourne quotes,

We of course should applaud positive images and we should protest damaging ones. But most important, we need to get involved in whatever way moves us to change not just the ads, but these attitudes that run so deep in our culture and that affect each one of us so deeply, whether we're conscious of it or not.

So what can be done in order to change the current attitudes? We must get involved. If there is a certain advertisement that is found offensive, first trigger the reason for its offensiveness. For example, does it promote an eating disorder or stereotype? Second, take action! Write a letter to the editor of the magazine in which the advertisement was published or television networks it was shown on. Whatever the action may be, it is integral that both men and women take a stand against the objectification and violence of women portrayed in advertisements for future generations.

To see a collection of offensive advertisements:   HYPERLINK "http://about-face.org/"   <http://about-face.org>   (click on "Gallery of Offenders")

## **6. About the author of this guide**

### a. Short biography

Alexandra P. Sedeno is a Junior Communication major at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. She is very passionate about topics concerning media and the portrayal of women as well as the female body image. This document was compiled as an assignment for Documentary Film.

### b. Contact information

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### c. A note to teachers, students, and anyone who uses this material in a group setting

This information was compiled by Alexandra P. Sedeno. She viewed the documentary film *Killing Us Softly III* and wrote a review on the film using sources found on the internet and Academic Search Premier.