



Messages from recent issues, respectively, of Ladies' Home Journal, Shape, Allure and, at right, Reader's Digest: "Slim Suits: Now Every Body Can Look Hot On The Beach"; "Super Sexy Legs!"; "Dare to Bare: 10 pages On Looking Better Naked"; "Firmier Thighs by Summer."

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# Message of female self-doubt at core of the glamour myth

When I was a boy, I noted with great surprise the hate stares that women reserved for each other — the devouring, top-to-bottom sneers or smirks aimed at the prettiest girls, the pitying glances reserved for those who were less than perfect. I had yet to understand, as I do today, that these catty interactions are the result of deep insecurities created and sustained primarily by predators in the marketing business. And, that while such insecurities often masquerade as self-improvement schemes, they ultimately harm women as well as men.

Not that women aren't eager to participate in the co-opting of the female body. Women writers, editors and advertising executives willingly cooperate in shaping the message of self-doubt at the core of the glamour/myth. Particularly in the spring, television programs and magazines of all types — even the current issue of Reader's Digest — seem to relish whipping women up into a frenzy over specific body parts. The current craze, reflected in the ubiquitous phrase "Thin Thighs By July," speaks volumes about our willingness to indoctrinate women in harmful belief systems for the sake of the almighty dollar.

Take, for example, the preoccupation with something called "cellulite." Technically speaking there is no such ailment or condition, but American women with fat deposits around their thighs purchase millions of dollars in "anti-cellulite" products every year. They are excoriated weekly by fitness and beauty gurus for having that "cottage cheese" or "orange peel" look, and some are so humiliated



Syl Jones

they willingly pay thousands to have it liposculpted away.

Then there is the question of thigh size. Like everything else, size ought to be relative. But calls for thinning and shaping the female thigh seem to be based on a universal standard of beauty, the model for which is . . . whom? No one in particular leaps to mind and you'd be hard pressed to catch a woman saying, "I want thighs just like Calista Flockhart's." Yet, there seems to be some ideal thigh shape to which mainstream American women are supposed to aspire. At least, it would appear that way.

Why is such a personal and intimate matter like the size and shape of the female thigh the subject of intense scrutiny and public discourse? Why have women and the men who love them not raised their voices in protest against the artificiality and crudeness of such judgmental standards? Who are the true stakeholders in women's thighs and what, finally, do they want? Before answering these questions we would do

well to examine the assumptions inherent in the commercial deconstruction of the female body.

The phrase "beauty is only skin deep" originally implied that a person's character was far more important than looks. Certain classes of Americans — particularly those involved in show business — never believed this bromide, and accepted a self-conscious preoccupation with every detail of one's body as the price of fame. Only since the Jazz Age, when the masses began to buy into the glamour fantasy that suffused pop culture, did average American women allow their spiritual selves to be subsumed so completely by the physical.

In so doing, these women set the stage for their conquest by aggressive marketers using the same "divide and conquer" tactics employed by military strategists. The resulting segmentation of women's bodies, complete with such absurd pseudo-scientific precepts as "combination skin," allowed great numbers of manufacturers to create thriving vertical markets for their products. Through commercial appeals that suggested women don't really know how to be beautiful, the alternative of "looking beautiful" has been presented as a surrogate — one body part at a time.

Perhaps I am alone in this, but it has occurred to me that this tactic is the commercial equivalent of an ax murder. Instead of presenting women as whole creatures who are good enough without the aid of beauty products, our culture Balkanizes them. By dividing (severing) women's bodies into convenient markets, women are dehumanized, objectified.

# Reader's Digest

**Smart  
Hotel Deals**

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**Are  
Your Kids  
Making  
You Sick?**

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**Firmer  
Thighs by  
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## Found: The Lost Children of Saigon

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**Karen Ryan rediscovers the airlift  
babies she once helped save.**

fied and even psychologically destroyed. No wonder so many women are clinically depressed.

Women aren't the only ones affected by such tactics. Men view these advertisements and often unconsciously apply their messages to the women with whom they live and work. The result can be exorbitant pressure, conscious or otherwise, on women to live up to the glamour fantasy. This kind of pressure, when mixed with what passes for love, can be a potent elixir that drives marriages apart and creates angry cynicism in both sexes.

The battle for control over women's hair, lips, eyes and breasts — indeed, everything above the waist — is now over, and many women have lost. So have the men who truly care about them, few of whom have the spiritual power needed to counter the deleterious effects of the glamour myth. The current battle, joined in 1982 with the publication of Wendy Stehling's bestselling "Thin Thighs in Thirty Days," rages below the waist.

It has taken nearly a century and a

half for the glamour myth to work its way up women's bodies, from the ankles to the hair, and start back down again. In its current iteration, the glamour myth has spurred radical shifts in clothing styles that represent, for the most part, misguided attempts to recapture our innocence through the approximation of public nudity. It's as if we wish to expunge the memory of original sin by remaking our clothing instead of our character. How ironic that this dream of reuniting ourselves with God is made all the more futile by the shame that is the essence of the glamour myth.

It has been said that in the spring a young man's fancy turns to love. What, pray tell, does a young woman's fancy turn to? The answer, I fear, is glaring at us from our magazines, movies and television shows: anxiety over the glamour myth — one body part at a time.

— *Syl Jones, of Minnetonka, is a playwright, journalist and communications consultant.*

# Teen pop ranges from sugar to spice

*But nowadays, it isn't girls who are likely to play nice*

By J.D. Considine  
Baltimore Sun

It used to be assumed that boys would be boys, and girls would be nice. Not anymore.

In today's teen pop-music scene, the boy bands are likelier to play nice while the girl singers come on naughty. So while the Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync and 98 Degrees deliver blushing sincere declarations of love, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Jessica Simpson load their singles full of nudge-wink double entendres about "What a Girl Wants."

Nor is the notion that these teen idols are good girls going bad confined to their music. The scandal sheets are full of naughty nuggets and tittering tidbits about these mini-divas.

Spears has been skewered by allegations that she had breast-augmentation surgery (charge she denies), and scolded for possibly playing house with her boyfriend, 'N Sync's Justin Timberlake. Aguilera has had her knuckles slapped for spending time with rock and rap bad boys such as Eminem and Limp Bizkit's Fred Durst. Simpson, eager to avoid such gossip, publicly proclaims her intention to hold



Spears

onto her virginity until she's married.

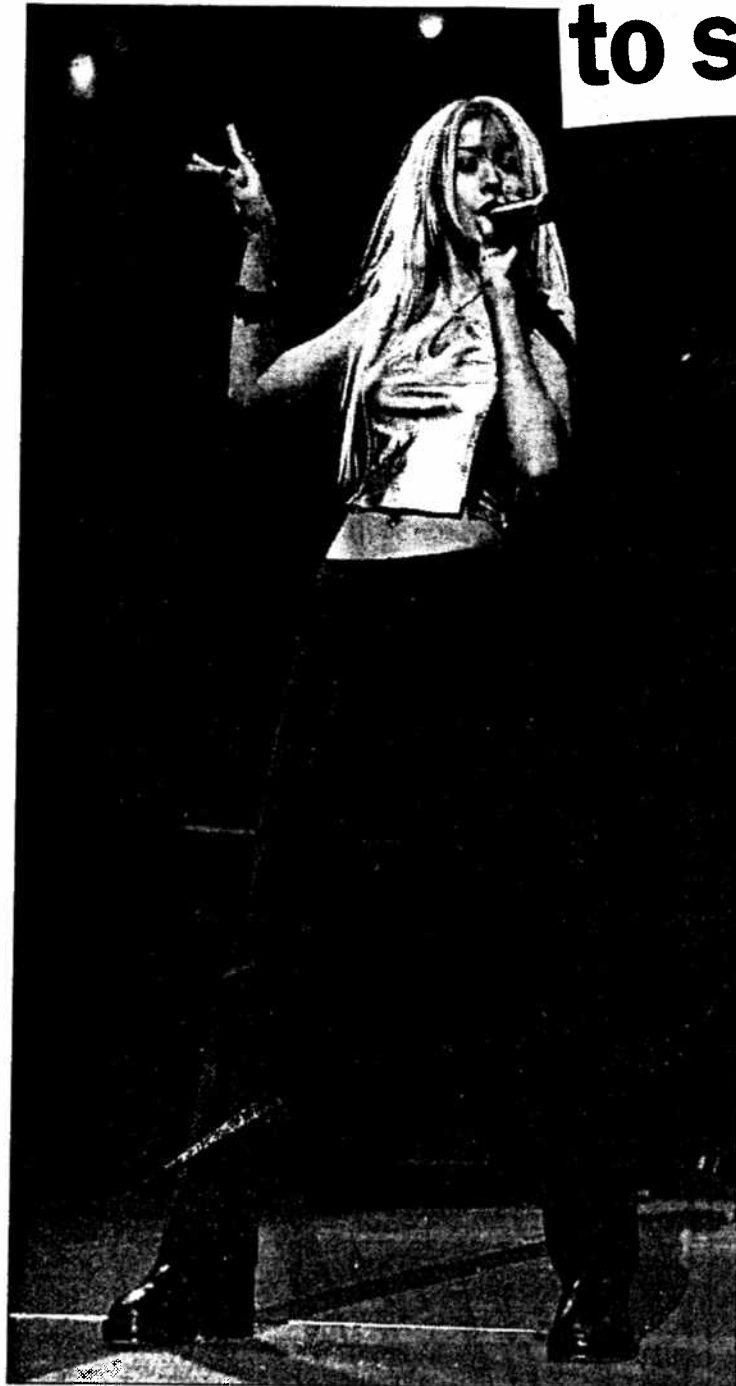
Meanwhile, the Backstreet Boys go on about how much they love their moms.

## A new double standard?

Has the world gone mad? Not really. But notions of what is acceptable behavior for young men in the pop-music world is not only different from what it is for young women, it's also different from what it was a generation ago.

"It's easier for young female artists to sing songs about, 'Oh, that guy was such a jerk. I'm glad I dumped him,'" said Elysa Gardner, a pop correspondent for USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. "That kind of sentiment, expressed by a male artist, can be perceived as misogynous.

"On the other hand, women artists are more likely to be criticized for wearing certain clothes, [or] for showing too much flesh. The gender hang-ups we



Associated Press

Nudge-wink double entendres such as "Genie in a Bottle" and "What a Girl Wants" helped Christina Aguilera win the Grammy for best new artist.

have in society as a whole gets reflected in music because the sexuality of young people in general has become such a focus."

Of course, "young" is a relative term. Although many of their fans would be considered children, Spears at 18 and Aguilera at 19 are old enough to vote, to get married and to take responsibility for their actions. Still, the fact that they're considered



**teen idols makes their youth seem somehow titillating.**

Gardner agrees: "There is definitely an element of taboo involved in sexualizing young girls. . . . We look at somebody like Britney Spears, and sometimes we forget that 18 years old is hardly too young to be aware of your own sexuality, and to want to express your sexuality in ways that feel right to you."

Trouble is, adults don't always understand how innocent these expressions of sexuality might be intended to be. Gardner, who has interviewed nearly all of today's teen idols, often gets an earful as the young stars complain about being taken out of context. "I hear them time and again expressing frustration over what they perceive as people overreacting to them just being themselves as young women," she said.

Much of the pressure that these young stars feel stems from the fact that they have such young fans, and thus are called upon to act as role models.

### **Different expectations**

Moreover, teen audiences — whether male or female — have specific expectations of boy bands. "They're really expecting love songs from the guys," said Lori Majewski, entertainment director at Teen People. "I think that's why the Backstreet Boys' 'I'll Never Break Your Heart' kind of music is so huge."

Majewski also points out that the girl singers' songs are often nowhere near as naughty as they're made out to be. Take, for example, Aguilera's "Genie in a Bottle," in which she exhorts her prospective boyfriend to "rub me the right way."

Nudge-nudge, wink-wink?

Not likely, says Majewski, who has spoken at length with the singers about the lyrics in their songs. She says that line is about taking the time to find the right person to go out with. And Majewski says the girl in "What a Girl Wants" is looking for space and the time to make up her mind.

OK, but it's still a double entendre, isn't it?

"Oh, definitely," Majewski says. "And that's definitely sexy."

So maybe what a girl really wants is to exercise her sex appeal while still being innocent, and to play at being a vixen while still being able to confess that she's just playing.

It's not an easy balance to maintain.

"Women are more easily criticized for using sexuality," Gardner said. "In fact, the whole concept of 'using' sexuality is something I have a problem with because there seems to be a notion that there's exploitation involved. More often than not, these are young women who are expressing their own sexuality in ways that, at the time, feels natural to them."