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Sex Sells: How Advertising Exploits Girls

Abercrombie spokesman Hampton Carney insists the thong [labeled 'eye candy'] was "totally appropriate" for children.

- USA Today, "Offensive Ads." 2003

There were once days when girls did not have to worry about their nails, hair, and the tightness of their skinny jeans before the first day of first grade. There were days when girls wore overalls and 'girl power' t-shirts proudly without an unconscious 'mature' agenda. There was such a thing as an innocent childhood and a girl just wanting to have fun (without a drink in her hand or guy in the picture). Nowadays, girls are sexually exploited in many facets of advertising. Girls as young as four years old are being targeted to desire the fantasy of being mature and sexy. Why wear a T-shirt when you can wear a halter top like they advertise in the stores? That is why it is in her size right? So she can wear it and get the attention she wants. For years, advertisers and marketers alike have been preying on the innocence of young girls. From retailers like *Abercrombie & Fitch* (ANF) and *Limited Too*, to companies like *Barbie* and *Bratz*, girls are reminded on a constant basis that they should consider how they look, act, and flip their hair because that is what the boys will like. The starting line is the infamous tag line "sex sells". Whether considered raunchy, pornographic, extreme, or just simply disgusting, advertisers and marketers get away with it because society is becoming immune to the realization of the exploitation that is happening right in front of them. "Images that used to belong to the

world of pornography are now commonplace in family magazines and newspapers, in TV commercials, on billboards, online” (Kilbourne 119). The world of sex and its images in advertisements have become so mainstream that adults are not quick to dismiss it. “These images are not only sexist, demeaning and harmful to all of us, especially children and teenagers, they also have a cumulative effect that is profoundly anti-erotic” (Kilbourne 119). In other words, using and targeting children, ‘tweens’, and teenagers (especially) in a sex crazed market is not at all sexy.

Girls are losing their childhood, or rather ‘girlhood’ to industries that are poisoning them with sex. To an extent the problem is not learning about sex, but according to Jean Kilbourne, “the problem is *what* they are learning, the age at which they’re learning it, and who is teaching them. Children get a very powerful and damaging kind of sex education from marketers and the popular culture” (31). Without ever actually saying, ‘hey, let’s look sexy’ marketers and ads are saying and selling everything around the unethical notion. According to Lianne George, “girls as young as 6 are adopting the external cues of womanhood, adorning themselves not only with lip gloss and nail polish, but also body sprays, skin glitters and spa lotions” (par. 4). While this concept seems harmless, it is not completely innocent. By telling girls they should start ‘grooming’ themselves and looking ‘clean’ at the age of 6 is fostering the idea that they should not get ‘dirty’ playing outside, being a kid. Girls are acclimating to their societal gender roles at alarmingly earlier ages. However, they are not doing it alone.

Abercrombie & Fitch is notorious for having highly sexual, erotic, and controversial advertisements of and for girls. They have been protested against on many occasions for the very subject of selling sex, and not so much their products. According to George, “Abercrombie

& Fitch and Limited Too sell fishnet stockings, skinny jeans, message panties and padded “bralettes” in micro-sizes. In 2002, Abercrombie & Fitch launched its infamous kiddie thong collection, arguing that girls as young as 10 ‘are style-conscious and want underwear that doesn’t produce a Visible Panty Line’” (par. 5). If that is not sexualizing girls than what is? How could ANF justify and believe they are doing the right thing by producing a thong collection for little girls, *prepubescent girls*? They shortly after dropped the line, but to have the audacity to put it out in the first place is shocking enough. Also, *Abercrombie & Fitch*’s ‘back to school’ campaign is something to worry about too. It, to phrase it appropriately, has a lot to do with the subject of ‘anatomy’ rather than actual books or clothes. Teens and ‘tweens’ are saturated with ads similar to the following advertisement in depiction: the typical hot young male and female half naked erotically engaging in sexual promiscuity as they disregard the mess of papers in the passenger seat. What kind of message does this send to girls? Getting ready for school means being half naked in a car with a guy? There is little to no correlation to the ad and the ‘back to school’ season, unless one counts the school papers they are ‘too busy’ to see falling off the seat. This ad, along with various ads from ANF, sells sex, but is not sexy. Advertisements that are promiscuous, dirty and honestly, just straight to the point are raunchy. According to the article *When Sex Isn’t Selling*, “raunchy campaigns communicate only one idea – “girl wants some” – using the same visual messaging typical of pornography. Raunchy is a cheap play for attention. It shows lack of imagination and depth in the people and brands that use it” (par. 8). This is a strong statement that makes a lot of sense. Ads that sell sex feed the fantasy that girls should be ‘getting some’, not concentrating on academics. However, while the sexual side of *Abercrombie & Fitch* is more so targeted toward teenagers it too affects younger girls that pass by billboards and even shopping bags unconsciously wanting the sexual attention they see attained. Exploiting

younger girls, unlike teenage girls, does not necessarily take models half naked in an erotic questioning position; it takes a *Barbie* and *Bratz* dolls.

In our society, little girls are seeing sexual images everywhere they look whether it is from toys, accessories, or celebrities. Whether sex is sold subtly or out in the open as blatant as the sky is blue, sexual exploitation is the world we now live in. “Our children, bombarded with these sexual images in advertising, TV programmes, music videos and on the internet, are pressured to look and act ‘sexy’ at absurdly young ages. Eight-year-old girls seek to emulate pop singers who look like streetwalkers” (Kilbourne 120). If a girl dresses the part, one must discover that she must act the part. Why just stop at the wardrobe change when you can be the whole package and have it all like they seem to in the commercials? There is no need for dating when you can seemly have fun in a raunchy spontaneous ‘ANF way’. “No wonder eight-grade girls are performing oral sex on boys on the school bus and that ‘hooking up’ (random, casual sex with no expectations) has replaced dating for many high-school and college students” (Kilbourne 120). These ads are making it socially acceptable to do and have set the precedent for such public promiscuity. Selling the fantasy that urges girls to engage in such activity is something these advertisements have been doing better and better each passing year. From teenage down to six year old girls, marketers are determined to reach them all no matter how offensive their marketing strategy may be.

Mattel’s *Barbie* seems to be the epitome of little girls everywhere across America, and the world. Girls can contently play ‘barbie’ for countless hours as they style Barbie to their personal liking. Barbie can have heels, a house, or a hummer! Whatever you want Barbie to look like for Ken she can! Now some might think: what is the harm in dressing Barbie?

Honestly, not too much except she is disproportionate, often sold in bikini theme boxes and (a newer feature) can have tattoo just about anywhere that says 'Ken'. The list goes on for the flaws that Barbie has. Girls are sexually exploited at very early ages through the simple interaction with a doll. Through playing with Barbie a girl could easily infer she should have a size zero waste, long playful hair, make-up, and of course a 'Ken' of her own someday. Little girls as young as 6 years old are learning and practicing the life they are encouraged to live. They should always be glamorous, clean, and often more times than not sexy. However, Barbie is just one of the classic icons that make girls consider the many fictitious ideals of being a 'sexy' desirable girl.

In 2001 (June), a brand of dolls came out that would later challenge the precious plastic world of *Barbie*. These dolls had fuller hair, a lot more make-up, and "a passion for fashion". *Bratz* challenged *Barbie* and proved to be more controversial on the issue of sexualization and exploitation of girls than Barbie truly ever was. According to Linn, *Bratz* dolls are a "ratcheted up male fantasy of what women should look like – big eyes, big lips, big breast, an anorexic wasteline and very long legs" (qtd. in George par. 25). The *Bratz* dolls pushed the envelope that Barbie never quite got to. They were characters who were all about being sexual, shopping, and socializing. They were girls who loved to look sexy with the hottest clothes and most sensational make-up. Advertisers did not push for or consider what parents would approve of, but what the girls would want to emulate. "Advertisers have long since woken up to the fact that aiming a product at children is generally more successful than pitching it directly at the parents holding the purse strings" (Bartlett 109). Parents, in most scenarios, want to give their child what they want because "they are susceptible to the "everyone is doing it" argument, and they don't want their kid to be ostracized" (George par. 14). It is a valid excuse that unfortunately

facilitates the idea of sex aimed at and exploiting children. But if children are unaware advertisers are exploiting them to sell sex does it hurt them in the long run? Advertisers and marketers are saturating the market of girls with images and symbols they do not fully fathom. Every sexual advertisement a little girl sees does not resonate 'sexy', but somehow they adapt to the term and emulate every aspect of it as if they understand it all.

A lot of girls at ages younger than six do not know what 'sexy' really is. The term that was created for such a phenomenon is 'corporate paedophilia'. The term 'corporate paedophilia' was "coined by Phillip Adams to describe the selling of products to children before they are able to read the language of advertising well enough to resist its power" (Bartlett 110). Companies like *Barbie*, *Bratz*, and *Moxie* [which is similar to *Bratz*] are banking their profits on the fact that their 'little consumers' do not fathom the message they send through advertisements. Essentially, when it is dissected for what it looks like, children are being subliminally advertised to. As the true meaning of the ads [sex] slip into their unconscious minds, the conscious part is only concerned with playing 'dress-up' or 'house'. These little consumers are not consumed with the idea or fantasy of becoming sexy, but they are consumed with being like the young women in the ads who seem to be sex 'personified'.

Teenage girls and young women alike are more educated on the sexual based strategies marketers try to campaign to them, but however, they still give in to the brand. Retailers like *Candies*, *Lucky Brand*, and *D&G* advertise women with guys in teasingly sexual situations. These young girls who are used to target an even younger audience are in playful poses to simulate sexual thoughts and give the impression that 'if you act and look like this he will want you, like he wants me'. According to Tom Reichert the guarantee of such a fantastic sexual

experience is, “a powerful promise for those experiencing sexual feelings for the first time” (51). Preying on the undeveloped sexual experiences of girls is how advertisers succeed at exploiting them. They create the world that they have yet to know and make sure they never want to forget it. Like never forgetting your first kiss, advertisers want to make certain you do not forget the first ANF mini skirt you got on your sixth birthday. From a girl’s first bikini to her first ‘real’ pair of cute jeans, girls are constantly observing what models in ads are wearing and how they are wearing it. In 1980, starlet Brooke Shields at the tender age of 15 starred in the infamous Calvin Klein jeans ads that exuded sex as she posed seductively on billboards and straddled her jeans on while rolling on the floor in commercials. As she flipped her hair and softly uttered, “You want to know what comes between me and my Calvin's? Nothing” Shields attracted a lot of attention, including negative reactions, which led to the ads being pulled. However, it was the start of a world of possibilities. Nowadays, ads that of Brooke Shields’ would be more than accepted in mainstream America. The generation of sex fueled ads toward girls is growing to limits that go beyond soft core pornography. Advertisements and toys are becoming raunchier, explicit, and mainstream. The idea of sex being a part of a girl’s childhood has become an accepted notion of reality. Familial axiology has grown to include the sexual exploitation of children seeing it as a norm of society. If other girls are wearing make-up then why could your child not? For example, girl beauty pageants are notorious for sexually exploiting girls with extravagant make-up, heels, hair extensions, nails, and dentures. These beauty pageant contestants are skipping their childhood and being swept up into the stratification of womanhood, as they are toyed about like objects. So if those girls are doing all of that it should not be a problem to put a little make-up on your daughter. As long as there are others who push the envelope on something it forever justifies you doing it on a smaller scale, right? The society we

live in is one of majority rules. This notion goes for advertisers as well. If companies like *Calvin Klein* and *Candies* are successfully using sex to sell their products then why shouldn't newer companies like *Hollister* do the same? Exploiting a target market because it works is alright in the eyes of advertisers and marketers. Whether in a totally sexual manner or a comedic fun way, sex will continue to be a way to reach children. If something is making you profit would you stop doing it because a few people did not agree with your ways? Perhaps not, but there is such a principle of ethics called into question. The use of sex to sell products will never cease to exist; however, it needs to become less exploitive of children and teenagers in order to be tolerable. "Sexual information will be used to sell products as long as people aspire to be sexually attractive to others. Nevertheless, advertisers should be called to task for targeting young people with sexual appeals. Just because it's effective doesn't mean it's right" (Reichert 52).

In today's sex crazed world, girls and teenagers are sexually exploited in advertisements as well as in target markets. Girls are being taught that who they are now will not be good enough in the real world when they grow up. In sexually exploiting girls through ads and toys, companies are making clear that sex is what we have come to increasingly care about (maybe even worship). We are not a society that prides itself on intelligence and skill, but on sexual deviance and materials that hone in on the idea of overt sexuality. While there are protests organizations out there fighting against such harmful exploitation of girls it is up to each individual, especially parents, to openly say it is not alright for girls to be overwhelmed with so many sexually driven advertisements. Soft core pornography should not be a mainstream concept. Girls as young as six years old should not have to worry about their weight and their make-up. There were days where little girls were called 'beautiful' without make-up. There was

a time where girls did not point at an *Abercrombie & Fitch* bag and ask ‘Mommy, what are they doing’? And most importantly there were days when girls were just girls having fun with no pressure from advertisers to grow up any quicker, and miss out on the best time of their young innocent lives.

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