

# Porno-chic

*The sexualisation of our culture*



Prepared by

\* **jellybeaps**

Bea Pierce  
29 Cowrang Ave, Terrey Hills  
0405 346 018  
bea@jellybeaps.com  
www.jellybeaps.com



## Sexy = cool

We all know that sex sells. We've grown up surrounded by imagery that suggests we need to be sexy and provocative in everything we do, from buying socks to doing our banking. Everything from magazine covers to billboards to music videos depict through vivid, often graphic imagery, how to look, how to behave and what to wear.

We've become so used to seeing these objectified representations of both men and women that we are no longer able to 'see' the meaning and the message communicated by this visual language. The more blasé, resigned or embracing people become to the saturation of our visual environment with these images, the less clearly we are able to see and the harder the marketing and advertising industries 'push the envelope' on what we will permit to be 'culturally acceptable'.

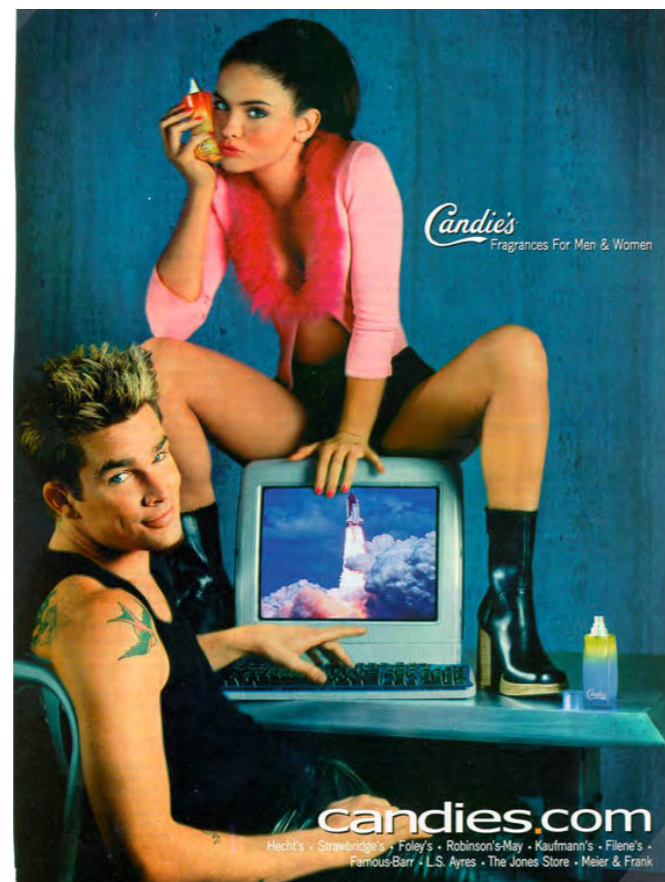
In the 1970's, German-born Australian photographer Helmut Newton caused a sensation with his erotic, stylised and often sado-masochistic fetish photography for magazines such as French Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and Playboy. His style, which blurred the lines between fashion and pornography, became hugely popular with the fashion and cosmetic industries, and many companies and designers rushed to embrace this 'porno-chic' aesthetic. Tom Ford, ex-Gucci designer, is often touted as the 'king of porno-chic', as he turned nudity into a necessity for selling everything from sunglasses to perfume.

In our current culture, porn has gained mainstream acceptance through brands as diverse as Calvin Klein, Lynx and Reebok, sports clubs, radio stations and food manufacturers using porno-chic to market their products in increasingly risqué advertising campaigns.

Both Postmodernism and the Internet have had substantial effects on the ubiquity of pornographic aesthetics in popular culture; the Internet has made access to porn easy and instant, and regulation of the distribution of porn extremely difficult. Postmodernist debate revolves around the ideas of subjectivity and relativity, making it extremely difficult to object on ethical or rational grounds, or build a case for, for example, the sexual exploitation of kids and teens. Postmodern media is characterized by fragmented, rapidly displayed and often contradictory, disconnected messages, making meaning irrelevant and attempts to interpret message a futile exercise.

We now have the Cult of the Consumer, in which marketing ideals rule and everyone - designers, photographers, parents, kids - are just pawns in the commodity game. This consumer cult is driven by 'cradle to grave marketing' and generational, social grooming in which 'culture' is claimed to be generated by the people and imitated through 'art', but which in reality is generated through advertising and sold to us as a commodity. 'Keep 'em dumb, make 'em want, watch 'em spend' seems to be the mantra of the corporate world and the proven technique for voluntary complicity is to 'give them what they want': sex.

We are encouraged to think no more deeply about these images than "Which bikini is the prettiest?" or "Wow she looks great in that!" but there are much more disturbing messages about socially acceptable behaviour, relationships and self-esteem constantly being subconsciously reinforced, and as marketers and advertisers push the 'fashionable' promotion of increasingly risqué and taboo subjects further, the consequences are alarming.



## Stupid = Sexy = Cool : Diesel

The first advertising case study I want to explore is the "Be Stupid" Diesel campaign, created by Anomaly, London. The campaign presents a series of ads targeted at teens and young adults exploring the contradictions between 'stupid' and 'smart', and the fact that stupid things are often seen as smart and vice-versa. Visually, the ads are very graphic, bright and colourful with a rock-n-roll trash party feel and some make blatant use of porno-chic under the guise of satire and in the context of a juvenile mindset.

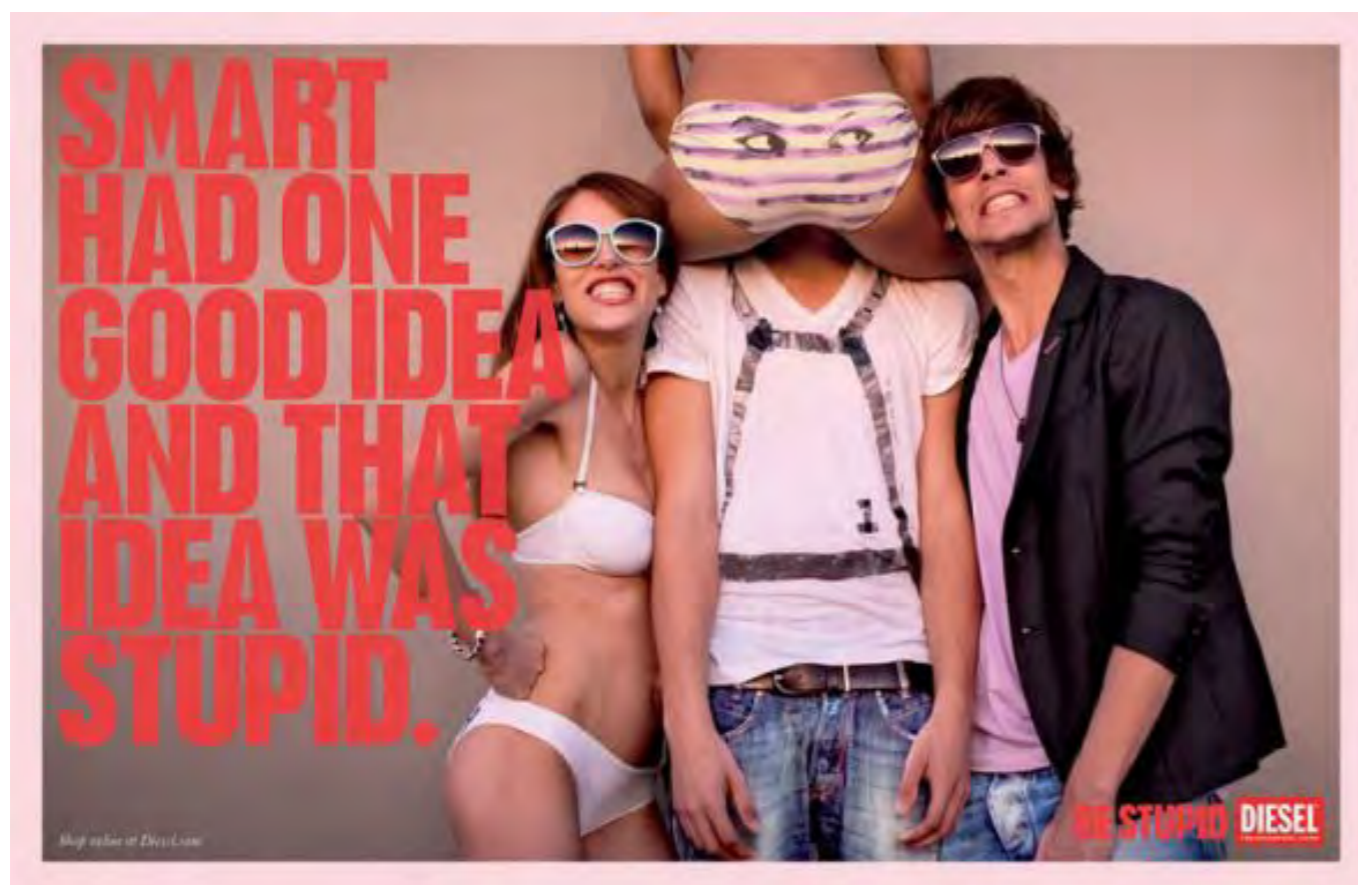
### CONCEPT AND EXECUTION

The Diesel manifesto for the campaign states that, "Over time a single sentence creeps into our lives. Don't be stupid. It's the crusher of possibility. It's the world's greatest deflator. The world is full of smart people. Doing all kind of smart things... That's smart. Well, we're with stupid. Stupid is the relentless pursuit of a regret free life." It goes on to draw comparisons between smart and stupid and why they prefer stupid, such as "It's not smart to take risks... It's stupid. To be stupid is to be brave." and "You can't outsmart stupid. So don't even try. Remember only stupid can be truly brilliant."

There are 15 slogans used in the campaign, including "Smart may have the brains but stupid has the balls", "Stupid might fail. Smart doesn't even try.", "Smart may have the answers. But stupid has all the interesting questions." and "Smart plans. Stupid improvises." What's clever about these slogans is the way they use the two objectives, 'smart' and 'stupid' as generic heroes who supplant expected words in popular wisdoms, creating a new collection of short popular wisdoms that evoke a sense of urban myth through their storytelling nature.

The visual language that supports the slogans is very important to the campaign. Neither the models or the product - the clothing - is portrayed as stupid; it is only their attitude or behaviour that is seen as stupid. There is great attention to detail and the imperative is that the clothes look good on the models at all times. The essential purpose of the brand is to sell clothes, no matter how creative or controversial the ads are and this is not lost.

The company has employed innovative use of both media and technology, and effective viral marketing techniques to gain maximum exposure, such as putting out a call for "stupid" people to star in a music video, created as their 2010 catalogue. The video was launched on YouTube on the 20th May and was the 8th most watched clip of the week with 765,000 views. (<http://corp.visiblemeasures.com/news-and-events/blog/>). Viewers are invited to film themselves "dancing the dance" and submitting it for their own chance at fame and glory, Diesel style. The version of the video on Diesel's website is interactive. When you rollover the people in the video, you can click on the clothes to see them and find out where to buy them.



## CULTURAL AND POLITICAL VALUE OF THE CAMPAIGN

The ads aggressively defy "political correctness" and focus on audience subjectivity, using notions of rebellion, of bucking the status quo and of not conforming to what parents, teachers and the community try to impose, coupled with double-entendre and satirical wit to suggest that only those who 'get it' are stupid (ie smart) enough to buy Diesel, and presumably, not do the stupid things depicted. The concept behind the ad campaign is a form of reverse psychology that plays on social concerns of dumbing down the masses as well as controversies of socially unacceptable teen behaviour.

The ads are not meant to be popular with parents; in keeping with (manufactured) teen ideology, the ads are meant to be divisive. Teens v's the world. The company does not want kids to listen to their parents, it wants them to listen to it. It is their friend, their peer, their collaborator, their partner in crime. The company 'gets them', parents don't. Parents are the stupid ones. So buy Diesel and give them the finger.

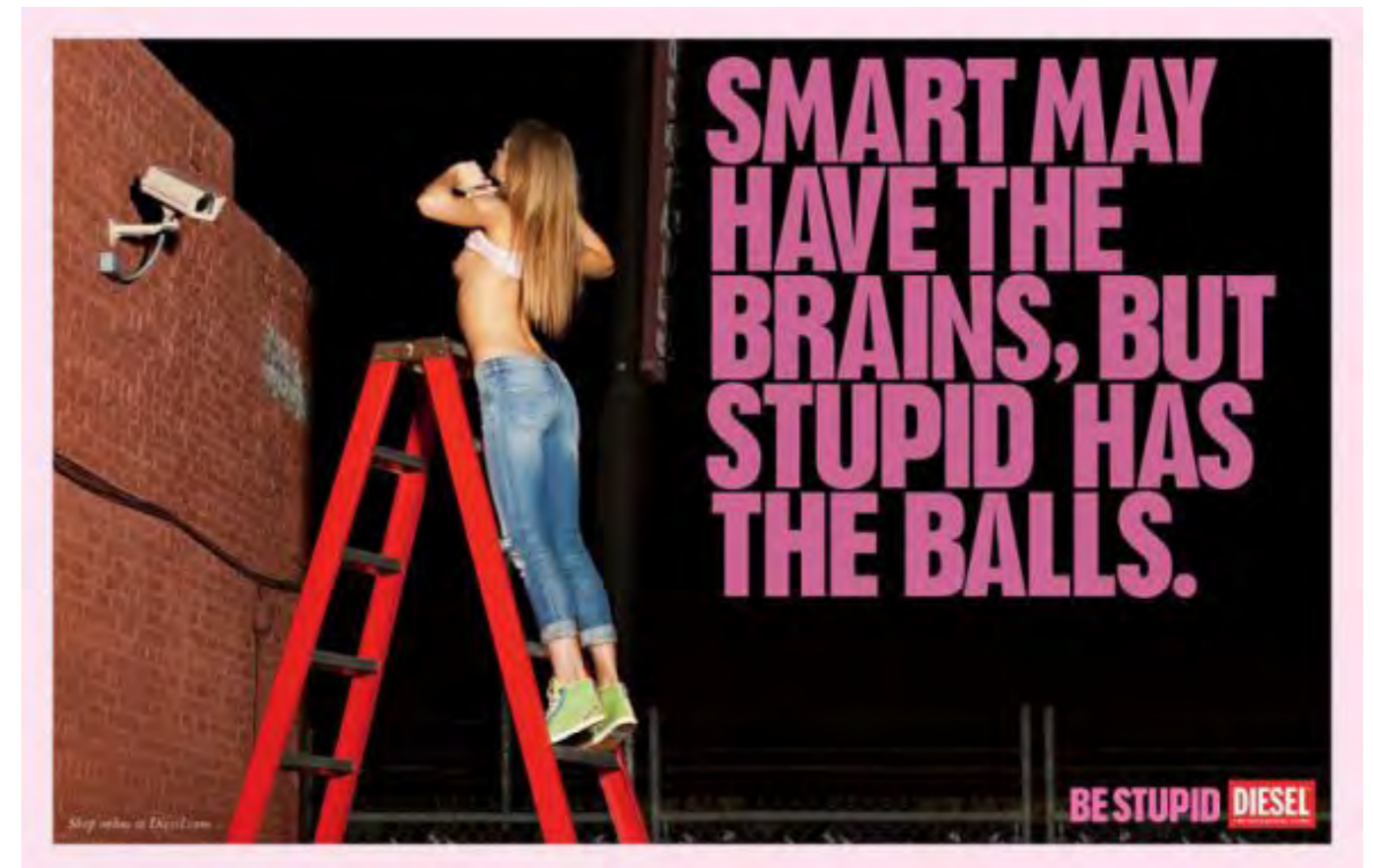
In theory, there's nothing wrong with this idea. Manufacturing youth culture has been employed in advertising for many years, and is designed to engage with a youth audience by presenting a culture to them as though it already exists and is created by them, that the company is down with.

But the execution of the ads is deliberately ambiguous and provocative. Unless you read the manifesto and 'get it', they could be seen to be advocating stupidity for stupidity's sake. Is it stupid (ie smart), for example, to be photographing your vagina while being stalked by a lion? Is this what has the balls? Or is it the lion who is stupid (ie smart) and therefore has the balls? Or are those looking on and laughing at the stupid girl the stupid (ie smart) ones that have the balls? In the context of the manifesto, is the act depicted bravery and better than not giving it a try at all? Is this stupidity in all its brilliant glory? Will this provide you with a regret-free life?

Given the increased trend towards encouraging child sexualisation and the amount of genuine stupidity that exists on a daily basis in the media, it's hardly surprising that the campaign has sparked controversy and outrage, especially at the notion that 'smart' in this context means stuffy, geeky and intellectual while 'stupid' means brave, sexy, daring and creative.

The ads are seen to appeal to a young teen audience and promote inappropriate behaviour as well as glorify acts of stupidity rather than subvert them in the minds of many, even amongst Diesel's own target group. Some online comments made about the campaign include, "Is this company mocking our generation by thinking we're really that stupid?", "Did anyone else think that maybe you don't need Diesel clothing to be creative and free? Maybe "creative" and "free" don't mean "reckless," "wanton," or "slutty?"" and "Shame on Anomaly for cynically promoting an idea that in spite of any claims of irony is morally bankrupt."

The Diesel campaign is a clever attempt to subvert the whole 'stupid' aspects of controversial, anti-social behaviour, including teen porno-chic. Love or hate the campaign, it is an excellent example of intuitive advertising innovation that will resonate with their audience and no doubt be very effective for the brand.



## Sexy = porn = cool

Recent trends in porno-chic have included the fashionable depiction of rape and the abuse of women, multiple partners, orgies and infidelity, and kiddie porn. Human rights, feminist and parent groups claim that these sorts of images advocate the behaviours represented in the ads as socially acceptable and promote the encouragement of this behaviour within the community; the industry claims these groups to be 'morally conservative extremists', that their images are harmless fun and that their target audience is perfectly able to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

Dolce & Gabbana, (in)famous for their sex-charged ads which often feature homoerotic imagery and dance with taboo subjects including necrophilia, were accused of inciting gang rape with a 2008 billboard in which a woman is held down by one man while several others look on impassively. D&G referred to the Spanish Government as "a bit backward" when it called for the billboard to be banned. The ad was pulled by D&G to "protect their creative liberty", saying that, "Spain, with its climate of censure, shows that it wants to read negative messages even where they don't exist."<sup>1</sup> Suggestions have been made that the billboard was a deliberate stunt designed purely as an attention-seeking exercise.

Calvin Klein's 1995 advertising campaign used images of models as young as 15 to mimic the "picture set" pornography of the '60s. The ads were slammed as pornographic and exploitative, earning them the nickname "jail-bait porn". The company insisted that its "message about the spirit, independence, and inner worth of today's young people has been misunderstood by some"<sup>2</sup>. Klein said the ads were not pornographic and were intended to "convey the idea that glamour is an inner quality that can be found in regular people in the most ordinary setting; it is not something exclusive to movie stars and models."<sup>3</sup> Calvin Klein has long been associated with risqué and controversial advertising. The company's 2009 campaign featured men and women engaged in group sex and was banned in America.

There is clearly a diametrically opposed ideology being presented on both sides of this argument. Do these images advocate and legitimise rape and child pornography or are they simply artistic expressions of glamour and independent spirit? Where does pornography stop and mainstream culture start? In a Postmodern world in which tolerance is political correctness and 'one man's trash is another man's treasure' is the accepted norm, it becomes more and more difficult to argue against the blurring of these lines. In the report '*Stepping up the fight against childhood sexualisation*', Nicola Gavey observes, "The fact pornographic aesthetics have become so mainstream and normative is a problem in itself because it becomes harder to critique and resist."<sup>4</sup>

Porno-chic certainly works to sell clothes, generate controversy and gain the companies involved enormous amounts of attention, publicity and ultimately profit. Calvin Klein has also been accused of creating their commercials as a stunt, a ploy that is becoming a trend amongst brands as they find they can get larger audiences online through viral marketing than they can on TV.





## VIRAL MARKETING

Companies deliberately create ads they know will be banned or will never get aired on TV to fake controversy and generate interest and/or justifiable indignation amongst their audience at the "injustice". Once the controversy exists, the company releases the video on YouTube, knowing that bloggers will assure it has a long life and large audience.

Another common technique used in viral marketing is 'astro-turfing' - the practice of manufacturing a seemingly valid 'grass-roots' form of protest by paying 'ordinary' people to make controversial and inflammatory comments or comments in support of the advertiser, making it even more difficult to know which comments are genuine and which are faked. Opinions and comments, genuine and fake, spread like wildfire across the internet, with hundreds of consumers - fans - leaping to the defense of the advertisers and flaming those who dare to criticise, providing the companies with ample evidence that they are giving people what they want; they 'lap it up and want more and more' is the standard rhetoric.

A number of companies have explored the idea of this by producing videos that appear to be home-made and in which the brands' logo is never displayed. The only clue as to who has produced the ads is in the 'accidental' name dropping or label flashing that might occur within the video. An example of this is the viral campaign created by The Names Agency for Elle Macphersons' Intimates, a series of home-made looking videos of women wearing lingerie 'playing' suggestively to the camera in their bedrooms. The ads mimic the narcissistic-voyeuristic trend of people videoing themselves and putting them up for public view in attempt to get attention or become the next 'famous for being famous' star. The videos are inevitably widely distributed by being shared around the Net, generating a subtle, deceptive infiltration into the public subconscious for that brand.

Viral marketing is becoming an increasingly lucrative and important tool for brands, especially those wanting to get around classifications and regulatory rulings, because the unregulated nature of the Web allows advertisers to get away with much more than they can in traditional mediums.

## ADVERTISING AS ART

Many companies politicise sexualised imagery by claiming the right to artistic freedom and expression. The role of art is to provoke, to challenge, to subvert and to question. The problem is that advertising is not art. Advertising is commercial art, deliberately designed with intent and an agenda specific to the client, not the viewer. Art has integrity *because* it has an independent voice. If advertising claims to be challenging perceptions and hoping to drive cultural change through its 'art', it is extremely important to know what that agenda is and in whose interest the culture is being changed.

### Sources:

1. ABC News online, March 2007, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200703/s1871208.htm>
2. Media Awareness Network, [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/handouts/ethics/calvin\\_klein\\_case\\_study.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/handouts/ethics/calvin_klein_case_study.cfm)
3. Male Model Retro, <http://male-model-retro.blogspot.com/2009/06/ck-jeans-1995.html>
4. "New Zealand Steps Up The Fight Against Corporate Paedophilia", Elizabeth Willmott, February 2010, [http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/03\\_15\\_too-sexy\\_index.htm](http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/03_15_too-sexy_index.htm)



## Teen = porn = sexy

My second case study looks at American Apparel, who sell "everyday gear" like socks and jocks. AA have dispensed with subtlety and gone for all-out blatant porno-chic, employing barely-legal models and porn stars to promote their brand - the product has become incidental in their advertising.

The company, known for its provocative and controversial advertising campaigns, is the largest clothing manufacturer in the United States and plays on its projected feelgood patriotic 'all American', brand free, inexpensive product. It is not only a manufacturer; it is a vertically integrated company, doing it's own wholesaling, retailing, advertising and marketing for basics including T-shirts, underwear, leggings and leotards. The company claims to make clothing for "men, women, children, babies and dogs." Dov Charney, American Apparel's CEO, purports to have a "socially conscious agenda", actively pushes his "no-sweatshop" policy and claims to have the "highest-paid apparel workers in the world", and was recognized for "Excellence in Marketing in 2008."<sup>1</sup>

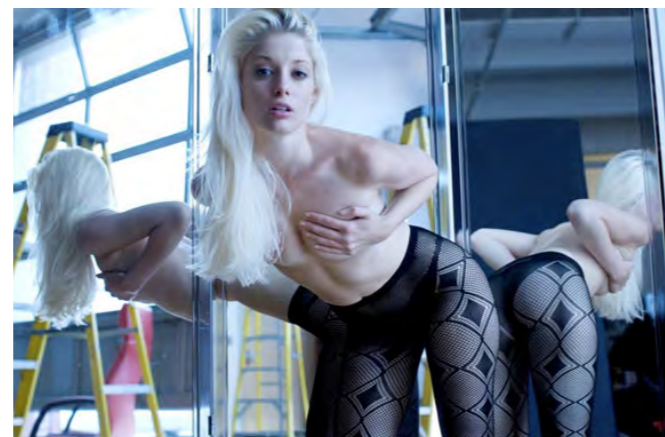
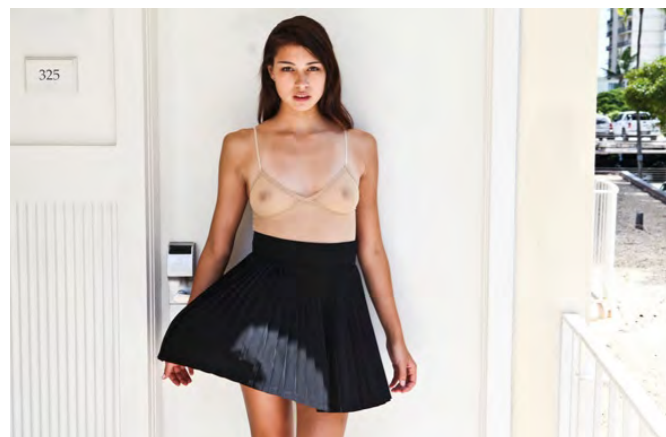
And yet, the company overtly advertises it's 'family-friendly' products using morally-free no-holds-barred porn aesthetics, often using very young models - 'everyday' people who work for the company or are recruited off the streets, and porn stars to promote their products. In most of the ads, it's quite difficult to work out what they are actually advertising.

The corporate culture at American Apparel is very much based on a 1960's notion of sexual liberation and freedom. Charney is a self-described "hustler", who feels perfectly validated in having consensual sexual relationships with his staff. "I've had relationships, loving relationships, that I'm proud of," he says. "I think it's a First Amendment right to pursue one's affection for another human being."<sup>2</sup> The company has recently been at the centre of several sexual harrasment cases against Charney, although he denies he has harassed or pressured anyone into a sexual relationship and attributes the lawsuits to disgruntled former employees.

Where the line between work and recreational sex blurs is in the creation of the company's ads. Charney takes many of the photos himself, many of which are shot at American Apparal privately owned apartments, and based on sexualised 'games', such as 'unofficial wet t-shirt competitions'. A company spokeswoman said staff and fans volunteer for the modelling work. "We also sometimes scout them," she said. "We very often photograph employees to appear in ads and catalogues, on our website and in-store art. ... Photo shoots are often done with members of our creative team or other employees."<sup>3</sup> The website openly promotes its 'evocative' and 'provocative' image gallery.

According to Charney, his home-made, cheap, no frills ad strategy is connecting with an underground hip youth who love surfing the net, gossip, fashion and gritty magazines like Vice and Purple. The ads are his way of recognizing "contemporary adult and sexual freedom."<sup>4</sup> He claims that 20-somethings are happy to be marketed to, as long as the images look real and unvarnished, matching their own casual attitudes toward sex. He interprets his ads and billboards as smart marketing techniques, but others feel that the images border on paedophilia and promote the legitimisation and mainstream acceptance of pornography.

Several ads have been banned by various advertising authorities. In 2009, the UKs' Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) ruled that an American Apparel ad "could be seen to sexualise a model who appeared to be a child". In a 6-picture series, the model stripped down to eventually reveal her partially exposed nipple. American Apparel argued that the model was 23 and the series was designed to show different ways of using its clothing to create a variety of looks. The ad, which appeared in VICE Magazine, was subsequently banned.<sup>5</sup>



Another controversial ad depicted a young woman, described as "pre-pubescent", photographed bent over from behind and clad only in a pair of American Apparel tights. A billboard of the ad was vandalized with someone scrawling, "Gee, I wonder why women get raped" across it. It was eventually replaced with a more family-friendly company ad.

American Apparel opened its first stores in Australia in March 2008 and quickly drew controversy, with people feeling that it goes too far and exploits both its employees and its young customers. "It goes without saying that most of the images of women on that website are overtly sexualised and some of them you would have to call pornographic. It's another example of the normalisation of pornography in popular culture," said Katrina George, a spokeswoman for Women's Forum Australia. AA male models, she points out, are not depicted in an overtly sexualised manner in the name of selling socks. In June 2009, AA's Melbourne store was slammed for 'sexploitation' with its use of imagery of young sales assistants, raising questions about the legitimacy of its workplace practices. Many young women models are employees of the company and are asked to submit several photographs of themselves when they apply for the job. The head of Victoria's Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Dr Helen Szoke, voiced concerned about this strategy but conceded it was not illegal.

While their sexually charged advertising has been criticized, it has also been lauded for honesty and a lack of airbrushing, and is considered to be some of the best in the industry simply because it boasts an unashamed, openly sexual and natural aesthetic. Dov Charney's response to his critics is, "They're old-thinking conservatives who are repeating false arguments or arguments that may have been true 30 years ago based on a context of social, cultural and political dynamics of another era. But right now, the women in the photographs and young adult women today I think celebrate the aesthetic of our advertising."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps he's right. The most surprising thing about the AA ads is the hundreds of people blogging and writing about the ads as being perfectly acceptable and in fact the next logical, welcome step in porno-chic. According to supporters of the advertisements, it's refreshing to see real-looking women, pubic hair and unnerving erotica. Many of the ads, and in particular, a recent ad featuring porn star Sasha Grey in full frontal nudity except for her thigh-high socks, appear to have become a symbol of neo-feminist liberalism. "Let me just say I can't think of an ad campaign in the history of ad campaigns that would make me want to buy socks, but, by golly I think I need to go and get me some socks."<sup>7</sup>

It's a strategy that clearly works. The company was ranked 308th in Inc.'s 2005 list of the 500 fastest growing companies in the United States, with a 440% three-year growth and revenues in 2005 of over US\$ 211 million. In January 2008 the Intelligence Group, a trend and market research firm, listed American Apparel as their number two Top Trendsetting Brand, behind only Nike. Company adviser Harry Parnass states that the brand is about aspiration and that they are "selling the American dream."<sup>8</sup>

The message being promoted by American Apparal is a particularly dangerous one; it mixes family values, social responsibility and patriotism up with the legitimisation of pornography and child sexualisation, and appears to have successfully instilled into the public consciousness that they are the good guys; they're providing a public service by using 'natural' looking porn stars to sell the humble sock.

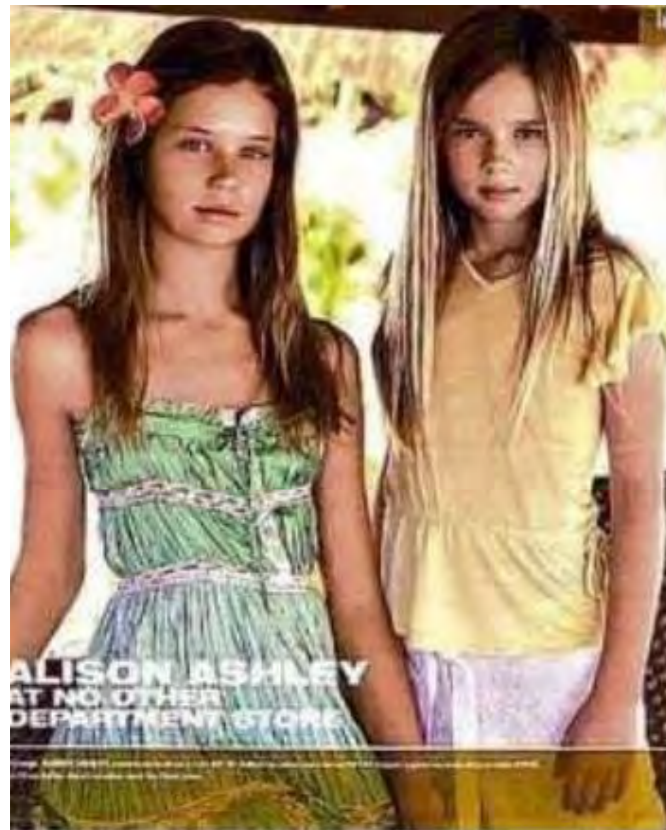
**Sources:**

1. American Apparel website, <http://americanapparel.net/presscenter/pressCompanyInfo.html>
2. "Living On The Edge At American Apparel", Bloomberg Business Week, June 2005, [http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05\\_26/b3939108\\_mz017.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_26/b3939108_mz017.htm)
3. "Cheeky ad campaign or sexploitation?", Rachel Wells, June 2009, <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/fashion/cheeky-ad-campaign-or-sexploitation-20090613-c6sz.html>
4. "Sexy Sweats Without The Sweatshop", ABC News, December 2005, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Business/story?id=1362781>
5. "Semi-nude model looked under 16", BBC News, September 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/8232162.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8232162.stm)
6. "American Apparel Ad Campaigns Dance With Porn", Ad Rants, March 2005, <http://www.adrants.com/2005/03/american-apparel-ad-campaigns-dance-with.php>
7. Blog post, <http://www.nerdygirl.com/2008/12/24/one-last-post-before-i-go/>
8. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Apparel#cite\\_note-61](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Apparel#cite_note-61)

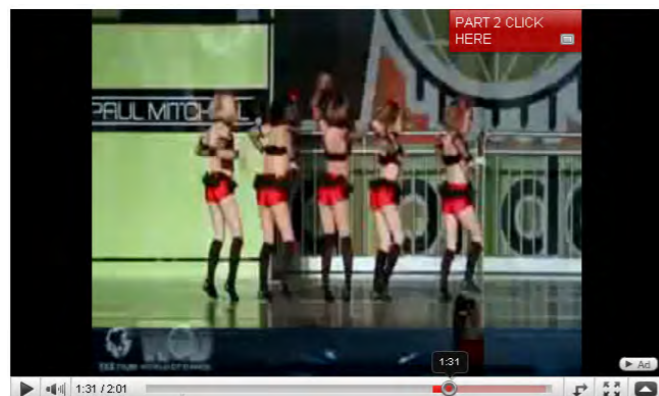




Lee Jeans were criticised for this highly sexualised campaign aimed at teenagers with an obvious infantilisation bent. Lee defended the ad by saying that the model was over 18 and therefore the ad was perfectly legitimate.



The brief for this ad for David Jones was for the girls to appear "slightly more adult and sexy."



The girls in this dance competition are amazing dancers, but are dressed like strippers and the choreography is overtly sexual. The girls are 7. On the YouTube clip, hundreds of comments have been left both deploring and defending it, with those defending claiming that there is nothing sexual, offensive or abnormal about encouraging little girls to be portrayed in this way.

## Kids = little hotties = sexy?

Teens have been a lucrative market since the term was coined in the 1950's and in the 1990's, a new market was identified as extremely lucrative: the so-called 'tweens'. According to social research company Australia Scan, "the 'tween' market is worth more than \$10 billion in Australia. Anywhere between \$250 million and \$1 billion of this is spent on clothing." (La Nauze and Rush 2006a)

Tweens are characterised as between 8 and 12 years old, although the age range appears to be getting younger, with magazines like Total Girl aimed at a target audience of 6-13 and Little Angel aimed at girls aged 5-8. There is now a booming industry in marketing everything from makeovers and high heels to bras and lip gloss to girls as young as 5 - or younger. There are 'bump and grind' dance classes for kindy kids and pole dancing toy kits, while tween magazines offer little girls "20 totally glam beauty tips and tricks" and pictures of 'hot' young boys.

But little girls love to dress up and to dance. Where's the harm in that?

There's a significant difference between little girls playing dress ups and dancing, and being encouraged to look like 'little hotties' and behave like overtly sexualised pop stars. Would the dance routine be less impressive at showing off the kids' talent if it didn't contain the sexualised choreography? Couldn't they still dance and look cute in more appropriate outfits? While the kids may be just mimicking what they see, and most adults may simply think it's cute, the subconscious message still revolves around sex and this is not an appropriate context for pre-pubescent children.

Kids do mimic what they see. And increasingly, what they see is overtly sexualised, often disturbing imagery. Dolce & Gabbana and Calvin Klein may be targeting consenting adults in their billboard advertising, but billboards are displayed in public spaces. And when they are 5-storeys high, they are very difficult to miss, or to stop a child from seeing them. Children are not blind and while adults may be able to distinguish between fantasy and reality, children may not be. Particularly in the first seven years - the formative years - children are extremely easily influenced by what they see in their environment, in society and in the world of adults as they try to work out the world and their place in it. The messages being sent to adults are ambiguous at best in relation to health and safety; for children they are potentially damaging both psychologically and developmentally.

As the debate over the role of media and advertising in child and teen sexualisation heats up, issues of social responsibility, censorship v's free speech and society's duty of care to protect the vulnerable divide the community and the corporate world alike.

In Australia, a 2006 report prepared by The Australia Institute, titled "Corporate Paedophilia" stated that, "Children are increasingly being portrayed in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that they do not yet possess ... Children are being eroticised in the interests of the corporate bottom line. It is particularly disturbing that this exploitation of young children appears to be becoming accepted as mainstream."

The report named David Jones as an active participant in the practice, who launched a law suit against The Australia Institute, but it was dropped prior to a 2008 Senate inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment. The advocacy group Kids Free 2B Kids obtained documents under the Freedom of Information act revealing that a brief for two girls aged 10 and 12, who appeared in an ad created by Saatchi and Saatchi for David Jones, asked that they be portrayed as "slightly more adult and sexy". (<http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/06/01/foi-reveals-djs-kids-were-supposed-to-be-adult-and-s-xy/>)

Armani Junior was asked to withdraw an ad from it's 2007 advertising campaign by the Children's Ombudsman of the Community of Madrid because it presented two young girls of Eastern appearance wearing makeup and suggestively posed. The Ombudsman was particularly concerned that they were of Eastern appearance, given that child prostitution in Eastern countries is already such a well-known social problem, stating that the ad "plays on the edge of incitement to sexual tourism."

Disney has come under fire several times in recent years for the sexualisation of young teens. One example is a billboard that appeared in China promoting Disney underwear, featuring a 12yo girl, suggestively posed and waving Minnie Mouse puppets. According to Disney, the billboard "caught us totally by surprise. We have literally hundreds of licensees making our products. They are supposed to submit any kind of imagery to us before it is used, but it's hard to enforce that sometimes." (<http://www.slate.com/id/2190209>)

Another occurred in 2008 with the furore over then 15yo Miley Cyrus, star of the popular kids show *Hannah Montana*, being photographed by Annie Leibovitz naked and appearing in *Vanity Fair* magazine. Miley is a popular topic for tween magazines, with the most current issues of *Little Angel* and *Total Girl* asking questions such as "Are you more Miley or Hannah?". This is particularly disturbing in light of the latest look the now 17yo has adopted; that of bondage-clad sex vixen.

Interestingly, many people do not see the sexual portrayal of teens in advertising as problematic - this is normal, it's what teens do - and seem happy to condone this form of 'art'. And yet when an artist such as Bill Hensen deliberately portrays a young teen girl as vulnerable, to highlight the fact that society should be protecting rather than preying on teens, people are outraged and label him a paedophile - to the point that even the prime minister, Kevin Rudd felt compelled to voice his opinion, deeming Hensen's exhibition "disgusting and offensive", forcing the closure and confiscation of the images and moving to bring in new laws concerning the portrayal of children in art. But not, it seems in advertising.

The Senate enquiry stopped short of calling for tougher government regulation on advertising, despite finding that children are increasingly exposed to highly sexualised images. One recommendation was that, "This is a community responsibility which demands action by society. In particular, the onus is on broadcasters, publishers, advertisers, retailers and manufacturers to take account of these community concerns." ([http://www.youngmedia.org.au/pdf/sydney\\_conference310/EH\\_310.pdf](http://www.youngmedia.org.au/pdf/sydney_conference310/EH_310.pdf)) Leaving the determination of what constitutes the depiction of children as sexual beings in the hands of subjective relativity and the discretion of advertisers - and only tempered by the complaints of parents.

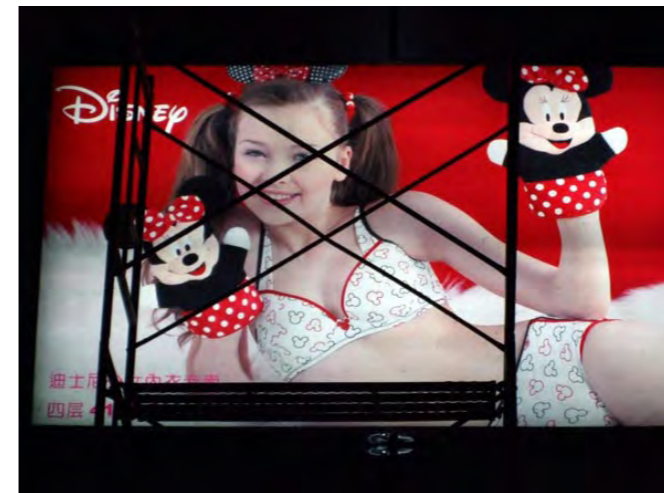
"The reliance on industry bodies to fix most of the issues is misplaced. If these bodies were willing to take effective steps to address the issues they would have done so by now." - Vice-president of Young Media Australia, Elizabeth Handsley. (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/parenting/mps-baulk-at-rules-on-sexualisation/2008/06/26/1214472722046.html>)



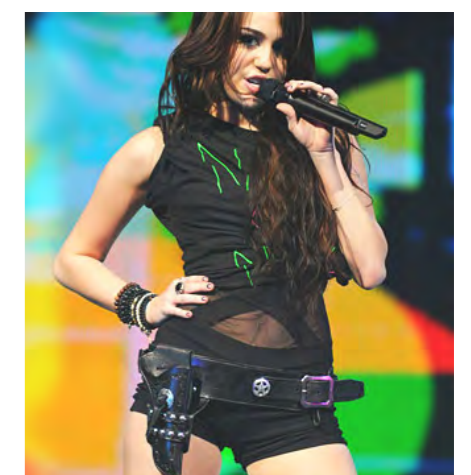
Depicting little girls in suggestive adult poses is becoming accepted as normal by the mainstream



Bill Hensen sparked outrage with his depiction of the vulnerability of young teens



This Chinese billboard for Disney's childrens' underwear features a 12yo girl



The changing face of Hannah Montana's Miley Cyrus



Julie Rrap's image is part of a photo-montage series exploring body image and identity; our image of who we are is intrinsically linked with fashion, cultural norms and social expectations.

## *Baby = sexy = stupid*

'Cool' can only be so if it is also taboo. If pornography becomes 'normal', will people become bored and seek out new taboos in order to still be seen as cool? And if so, what's next? Torture chic? Mutilation chic? Incest chic? Tiny tots porn chic?

What role should social responsibility play in the argument on advertising and the protection of children? Companies argue that it is not their role to be concerned with morals or ethics, advertising agencies claim that they are simply doing what their clients pay them to do and governments are reluctant to impose any regulations that may impede free trade or obstruct business.

One example comes from Melbourne, where a billboard for a brothel appeared on a school route. The advertisers' response to community complaints was to advise the Advertising Standards Board: "It is acknowledged that the billboard is located in a route for school children before and after school. To claim that this creates a problem is naïve. Such a claim ignores the valuable educational role played by advertising, and in this instance will assist in helping to debunk misconceptions that are frequently held by some members of the community with regard to lawful prostitution."

What should we deduce from this is the educational role played by advertising?

Parents, on whom most of the expectations are placed to protect children, find themselves increasingly under attack for being either too conservative or not conservative enough and unsupported by either government or society in being able to protect their kids. The argument that we all have a choice is a lie when it comes to protecting children from sexualised media. It is not realistic to tell parents that all they need to do to protect their children is to choose not to buy a brand or to simply turn off the TV. With our environment being continually saturated with sexually explicit media and both corporations and governments refusing to be concerned with ethical social responsibility, parents are not able to take their children to shopping malls, supermarkets or even to walk down the street without seeing inappropriate imagery or encountering controversial products. It is hardly helpful or constructive to suggest that parents have 'choices' if this means shutting themselves and their families away in a box.

I decided to try to create an educational ad, designed to show how ludicrous it is to enforce unnaturally early sexualisation onto children and to highlight the potential cultural danger if this trend continues; a vision of the future. The image needed to be striking but uncomfortable for people to see, without exploiting a child. I used the Diesel ad format because the graphic style was perfectly suited to this task. The headline is an attempt to spoof Diesels' idea of smart-stupid reversal and to put a proposition to people, allowing them to come to their own conclusion without lecturing to them.

Inspiration for the image came from my 5yo daughter wanting to recreate an image by Australian artist Julie Rrap, using her own feet and dress-up shoes. She was fascinated with how the artist had created the image and wanted to learn Photoshop so that she could learn how to do it. She art directed the photo shoot and the photo mounting, as well as having a go at colouring in the toenails.

# Conclusion

As models look younger and younger, grown women are encouraged to dress like children while children are encouraged to dress like adults and take on adult behaviour. Porno-chic has become the accepted norm in mainstream culture, with people 'confused' about whether depicting rape, abuse or teen porn in the name of fashion is really a 'problem'.

Many of the concerns about the social and cultural implications that may result from this increase in porno-chic and child sexualisation - validation of paedophilia, unhealthy teen sexual practises and promiscuity, damaging self-esteem issues - are drowned out by the loud and angry indignation of those against any form of reasonable censorship or the curbing of sexually explicit imagery that they enjoy looking at.

Does this really indicate a sophisticated modern culture or a civilization in decline? Where – and when – do we draw the line and say this is simply unacceptable?

The whole notion of boredom and the relentless exploitation for ever more risqué coolness may simply be learned behaviour, a by-product of generations of manufactured culture and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We are all of us - CEO's, advertisers, models, designers, photographers, parents and consumers - complicit in the creation of this culture and we all have a responsibility to draw a reasonable line in the sand and identify the point at which something is not acceptable for mainstream, public display.