

Sexualized Images in Advertising

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Over the past ten years, advertisements in mainstream magazines have increasingly relied on the explicit sexualization of both men and women to sell products. Over the same period, the models used have become younger and younger.

The images in these ads often contain or imply

- violence
- superiority and domination
- dismemberment (fragmenting and sexualizing body parts)
- playfulness and exaggeration
- coy behaviour
- approval seeking
- emaciation
- drug addiction
- fetishism

It's not unusual in the fashion industry to see very young models setting standards of attractiveness for older women. What's new is the emergence over the past two decades of highly eroticized portrayals of these young women. The same trend applies to men: images of very young men commonly focus on the abdominal/genital area, with traces of pubic hair or genital "bulge" clearly visible.



This model is reminiscent of the early Kate Moss in Calvin Klein ads for the fragrance Obsession.



Images of highly sexualized youth are not just a marketing tool. They also deliver powerful messages about sexual behaviour to young people. This series of ads for Buffalo jeans appeared in the adolescent-oriented magazine, CosmoGirl!. A second ad in this series depicts a young woman lying on her back with her hand down her open jeans, simulating masturbation.

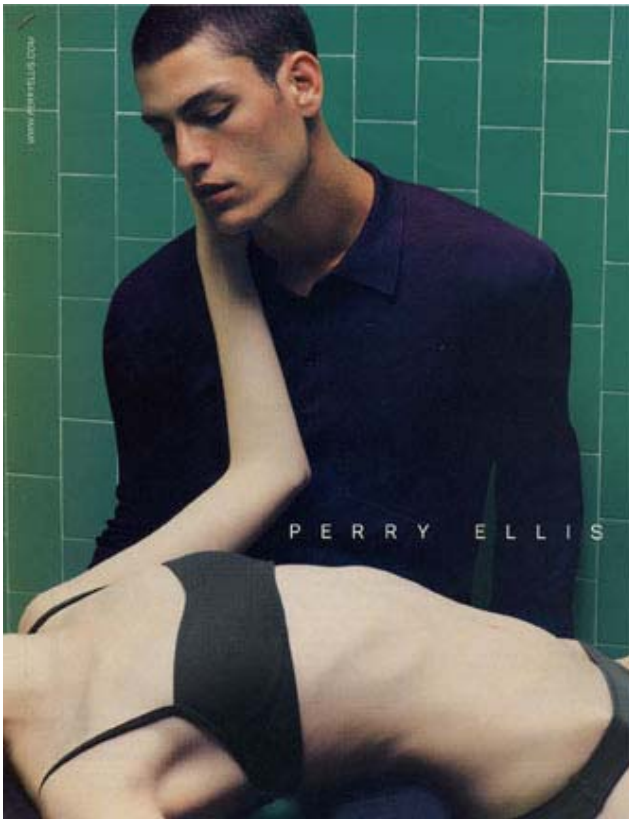


Ads containing sexualized images also deliver strong messages about gender relations. This Gucci ad campaign uses young females to promote its clothing, but with overtones of violence and domination. The positioning of the young woman's hands (one protecting her genitals and the other possibly lifting herself up from a prone position), the expression on her face and the pronounced genital "bulge" of the headless and assertive male conjure up images of rape.



Gucci often uses dismembered, objectified females in its ads. Note the male model – typical of those used in this particular campaign (which consisted of a series of sexual tableaux): quite young, emaciated and wearing a deadened expression.





The ads in this series from Perry Ellis are set in a gym shower and depict men in dominant poses over seemingly lifeless women. Once again, Ellis is capitalizing on objectified images of women, blended with violent and fetishist overtones. In at least three of the ads in this campaign, the women are clothed while the men appear to be naked. Dismemberment is also a prominent feature of this campaign.





Versace uses sexualized fetishist imagery in its depictions of young women. Note the deadened, "heroin chic" look of the clothed model. Sex depicted in advertising is seldom portrayed as a joyful act. More often than not, pleasure has been replaced by boredom, ennui and deadened emotions.

Sex Sells

Advertising often pushes the boundaries of good taste because of competition for "eyeballs." Any image that entices a reader to linger over an ad – whether tasteful or not – causes that person to remember the particular brand advertised. Even controversy can be effective in getting a brand or name into the public eye (as Calvin Klein has often proved).

There can be no denying that "sex sells." Abercrombie & Fitch, one of the most successful and trendy US clothing manufacturers, now puts its catalogues (which are geared to college students) in plastic bags to prevent them from being opened casually, because of controversy over the sexualized images of young people contained in them.

It's also thought that sexualization and fetishism are increasingly being used as a means to attract gay and lesbian consumers, who tend to be a fairly affluent and largely untapped demographic. It's not uncommon to see ads featuring women in provocative, sexualized encounters – images that attract straight men and gay women, as well as male teens.

Increased sexualization in advertising is not happening in isolation; rather, it reflects the overall pushing of the envelope that is occurring throughout the media. In film, television, music videos and popular culture, sex is increasingly pervasive and mainstream – for example, music videos of artists such as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera have been directed by well-known directors of pornographic films.

Effect of Sexualized Images on Children

Child development experts have long raised concerns about children's exposure to sexualized images. There is speculation that, physiologically, early exposure to these images (combined with other factors) may trigger the onset of puberty.

From a mental health perspective, continual exposure to sexualized images in the media may lead young people to believe that more teens are sexually active than is actually the case and that “fringe” or exploitative sexual behaviour is normal.

Increased exposure to unrealistic sexualized role models – for both boys and girls – can also affect self-esteem, body image and expectations regarding the appearance and behaviour of the opposite sex.