

CHAPTER 11

Reviving Lolita?

A Media Literacy Examination of Sexual Portrayals of Girls in Fashion Advertising

Debra Merskin (2004)



Using a media literacy framework, sociologist Debra Merskin examines the portrayal of “girls as women” and “women as girls” in four fashion advertisements. She argues that the continued sexualization of young girls in popular culture has significant implications for their psychological and physical well-being.

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta.

—Nabokov (1958, p. 1)

First, there was the book. Then there was the 1962 film followed by yet another filmic version in 1997 of Nabokov’s (1958) infamous best seller *Lolita*. Simultaneously repulsive and fascinating mediated portrayals of young girls as inviting and willing participants in their own sexual exploitation have fueled many a male fantasy. Sexualized images of girls are not only found between the covers of books. Rather, “under-aged sexualized ‘nymphets’” have provocatively posed in television programs, movies, magazine stories, and even more so, in advertising (Albright, 2002, para. 4). Even consumer products are named after the literary vixen and celluloid coquette: Lolita Lempicka fragrance, Lolita leggings in a recent Nordstrom catalogue, or playing on words, Nolita hair care products with the subheading “no limits, no boundaries.” Although not necessarily named after sexy stars, sexually alluring clothing has reached the prepubescent crowd as well. Abercrombie & Fitch, for example, faced criticism over marketing thong underwear, with

the words “eye candy” and “wink wink,” to the age 7- to 14-year-old crowd. A spokesperson for the company said, “The underwear for young girls was created with the intent to be lighthearted and cute” (Odell, 2002, para. 6). Similarly, a Fetish perfume advertisement raised a stink with the image of a young-looking girl with blackened eyes and the copy “so he can smell it when you say no.”

The message from advertisers and the mass media to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects. The increasing sexualization of children, in particular girls, in fashion advertising is a disturbing phenomenon (Kilbourne, 1999a). To examine this inclination, I apply Galician’s (2004) seven-step media literacy analysis framework to illustrative magazine fashion advertisements. My central concern is fetishization of young girls’ innocence and their vulnerability to physical and emotional violence as possible outcomes of sexualized representations in the media (Kincaid, 1998). Images cannot say “no.” Just as “eroticized gazes at the child-woman” are everywhere (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 166), so too are sexualized portrayals of women as child-like. In the media in general and

fashion advertising in particular, the “merchandising of children as sexual commodities is ubiquitous and big business” (Rich, 1997, p. 23). Accumulation theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 1994) predicts that if messages are seen and heard consistently across media forms, corroborated between those forms, and persistently presented, they will have long-term, powerful effects on audiences. Hence, the accumulation process normalizes looking at images of and thinking about preadolescent and adolescent girls and adult women as sexually available.

In the following sections, I briefly discuss the sociological and cultural context within which girls are sexualized, explore ideas about the use of adolescent girls’ bodies in fashion advertising, apply Galician’s (2004) seven-part media analysis framework, and reflect on the potential consequences of sexual images of girls in the advertisements. As a method of analysis and pedagogy, a media literacy perspective such as Galician’s provides the mechanism through which this issue can be explored and functions as a tool to educate parents, teachers, and young people about the existence of and problems with this type of representation. The findings are important to scholars, parents, and policy makers who, when armed with knowledge and skills of media literacy, can work to disillusion the sexualized images of girls in popular culture.

Ideology of the Sexualized Child

In contemporary culture, the name Lolita has become synonymous with forbidden lust and love of preadolescent, and by extension, adolescent girls. Looking at sexualized portrayals of girls appropriates them for male consumption. Defined as “the voyeuristic way men look at women” (Evans & Gamman, 1995, p. 13), the male gaze appeals to the scopophilic desire of seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body and “projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27). An image “orchestrates a gaze and its pleasurable transgression. The woman’s beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imagining—framing, lighting, camera movement, angle” (Berger, 1972, p. 43). This “fusion of sexual and ideological issues” supports men as “active, thinking subjects and women as passive, receptive objects” (Caputi, 1994, p. 16). Specifically, Walkerdine (1997) posited, “There is a hidden and covered-over eroticization of little girls in the everyday gaze at them” (p. 162). The girl model’s return of the gaze offers the simultaneous appeal of the vampish and virginal, the forbidden and accessible.

The “pornographication of the American girl” (Junod, 2001, p. 133) is found in television programs, movies, video games, music videos, magazines, and popular culture. A plethora of “erotically coded” images of adolescent girls pervades American popular culture (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 3). Mohr (1996) described society as saturated with “pedophilic images” that are “surprisingly common” considering how we “careen from hysteria to hysteria over the possible sexiness of children” (p. 64). Before directing Britney Spears’s videos, Gregory Dark directed pornographic films. Dark described the transition of pornographic presentations from traditional sources into mainstream popular culture as “not so much anomalous as inevitable” with an appeal based, at least in part, on what he refers to as “the lure of jail bait” (Junod, 2001, p. 133).

Hollywood had and has a bevy of beguiling under-age beauties. Mary Pickford, Deanna Durbin, Carroll Baker, Tuesday Weld, Hayley Mills, and Sue Lyon, all teens when their careers began, became known for portrayals of under-age nymphets “who enjoyed the attentions of men but made a game of arousing them” (Sinclair, 1988, p. 92). Adding to the mystique, Tuesday Weld declared, “I didn’t have to play Lolita, I *was* Lolita” (Sinclair, 1988, p. 108). In the 1970s, 20-something actor Pia Zadora looked like a child and played “jail bait” roles (Burchill, 1986, p. 122). In the 1980s, Brooke Shields was “sold as a fully-fashioned grown up sex child” at age 12 in *Pretty Baby*, as was 12-year-old Jody Foster in *Taxi Driver* (Burchill, 1986, p. 123). Both played characters who were not only sexualized preadolescents but also prostitutes, adding a layer of invitation, accessibility, and possibility to the gaze. In the 1990s, in *Interview with the Vampire*, 9-year-old Kirsten Dunst played a woman trapped in a child’s body. Drew Barrymore is the eternal cinematic wild child described in *Esquire* (Hirschorn, 1994) as “thespian, pinup, recovering addict, teenager” and 10 years later in *Elle* as “28, which technically is pushing 30, but she looks 16” (Glock, 2004, p. 122). Sinclair (1988, p. 5) called these portrayals the “nymphet syndrome” in movies.

Magazines also have a version of the teenage tart in cultivating a climate of acceptability and not only in the advertising contained within them. In an extensive study of images of children, crime, and violence in *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* magazines, Reisman (1990) found during the period from 1954 to 1984, 6,004 images of children (in cartoons and advertising) that accounted for 24% of all representations containing children. It is important to note that depictions of child sexual abuse showed the child unharmed or having benefited from the activity (Reisman, 1990, p. 156). In 2001, Dark art-directed a

Rolling Stone cover featuring Christina Aguilera with shorts unzipped and her "athletic tongue licking her lascivious lips" (Junod, 2001, p. 133). Other examples include the cover of the June 1997 issue of *Spy* magazine with Christina Ricci, Alicia Silverstone, and Liv Tyler dressed in their pajamas with the word *jailbait*. The feature, which declared the state of "the new Lolitocracy," also included other teen girl stars such as Anna Paquin, Neve Campbell, Natalie Portman, Claire Danes, and Brandi. The March 1996 issue of *Playboy* showed a "knock-kneed adolescent in a parochial school uniform depicted as the 'stripper next door'" (Smith, 1996, p. 11). Used in this manner, "pornography can be considered mainstream" (Kilbourne, 1999a, p. 271). Today, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Destiny's Child, and Beyoncé are "just adult enough to be available, just young enough to be non-threatening" (Asher, 2002, p. 23).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, advertising became the domain of sexual symbolism and seduction where adolescent girls are continually "marketed as highly sexualized beings, ready to cater to the whims of men" (Asher, 2002, p. 23). In the early 1990s, a *New York Times* magazine fashion spread, "Lolita is a Come Back Kid," showcased grown women as adolescent girls, infantilized and powerless, standing around in baby doll-style dresses that reached only to the upper thigh, hair arranged in bows and barrettes (Kilbourne, 1999b, p. 141). The 14-year-old-and-under emporium Delia's sells thongs with slogans such as "feeling lucky?" and tiny T-shirts proclaiming their wearer as a "porn star" (Pollet & Hurwitz, 2004, para. 7). This "beauty pornography" artificially connects commodified beauty "directly and explicitly to sexuality" (Wolf, 1991, p. 11).

Fashion advertising imagery is replete with photographs in which women are "dressed down" like little girls and conversely, young girls are "dressed up" as grown women, offering a veritable visual feast based on pedophilic fantasy (Cortese, 1999). In 1980, 14-year-old Brooke Shields informed us that nothing came between her and her Calvins. As the Calvin Klein label grew, so did opportunities for creating controversy. Were the models in the campaign older than 18? What about the little boys and girls bouncing on beds dressed only in their underwear? Calvin Klein spokespeople stated these advertisements were intended "to capture the same warmth and spontaneity that you find in a family snapshot" (Media Awareness Network, n.d.). In the March/April 2004 issue of *American Photo*, 10 young women are presented as the "faces and figures that define beauty now" (Sterling, 2004). One model is described as "barely 15," a

16-year-old as "the girl the industry wants with abiding passion," a 17-year-old as having "faunlike [sic] beauty and impossibly long limbs," and another lambent girl as a "feline Canadian" (Sterling, 2004, p. 64).

The strategy behind these advertisements goes beyond the sexualization of adolescent girls but supports an ideology of lower regard and class status for women and children (Goffman, 1976). *Ideology* is defined as "those images, concepts and premises which provide the framework through which we represent, interpret, understand, and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence" (Hall, 2003, p. 89). Althusser (1969) suggested ideology provides "a representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to the real condition of existence" (p. 233). Through the social construction of sexuality, society shapes sexual desire, and the appropriate or inappropriate targets of that desire, through the controlled production of cultural images (Henslen, 1993). Eventually, beliefs supporting certain behaviors and images become reified or, drawing on Hall (2003), they are articulated in ways that make them appear natural, normal, and hence, unremarkable. Thus, sexualized representations of girls in advertising fuel the "ideology of girl as sexual agent in the imaginary relations between men and girls provided by these images" (Albright, 2002, para. 4). The willingness, passivity, and availability suggested by these images have the potential to fuel pedophilic desires.

Reading Sexualized Images

Silverblatt's (1995) five elements of media literacy inform this article: (a) "awareness of the impact of the media," (b) recognizing media content as a "resource for cultural insight," (c) understanding the process of mass communication, (d) "developing strategies to analyze and discuss media messages" and as a result, (e) increased enjoyment and appreciation of media content (pp. 2-3). Galician's (2004) model extends the inquiry by adding redesign of media content, discussion of the effects of the message, and steps for change. In the following section, Galician's "seven-step *dis-illusioning*" model is applied to four fashion advertisements to unveil the façade of implied sexual innocence. The user of this model goes further into the analysis and initiates change by incorporating elements of reflection and action—"action learning's empowerment spiral (awareness, analysis, reflection, and action)"—an essential aspect of the present study (Galician, 2004, p. 107).

Dis-Illusioning Girl Images in Fashion Advertisements

Step 1: Detection (finding/identifying). Four fashion advertisements that contain sexualized representations are examined to illustrate my concern about what appear to be underage girls. These advertisements appear in current mainstream American print publications (*Vogue*, *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The New York Times*).¹ Although all models are conceivably older than 18 years of age, three advertisements display girls positioned and made up to look older (La Perla, Baby Phat, and Gucci) and the fourth is of a woman made to look like a little girl (Marc Jacobs).

Step 2: Description. La Perla is a high-end Italian-based, international lingerie company that has global retail affiliations. In *The New York Times* (February 12, 2004), the company ran an advertisement featuring a young woman who appears to be a preteen girl. Although the advertisement is in black and white, a visit to the Web site (<http://www.laperla.com>) reveals her to be a blonde girl/woman wearing a pale blue lace demi and matching G-string type bikini panties, leaning against a shadowy cream-colored wall. Her hands reach down and behind her bottom. Her gaze is somnolent and she looks directly at the viewer.

The second advertisement is for Baby Phat, a clothing company owned, until recently, by rapper Russell Simmons and his wife, supermodel Kimora Lee. Not only do the advertisements seem to be peopled by young girls but the models are posed, positioned, and prepared in ways that border on pornographic as well. On the company Web site (<http://www.babyphat.com>), celebrities who wear Baby Phat clothing are listed and range in age from Alicia Keys (20) to Madonna (46). An advertisement from the Summer/Spring 2002 collection displays an African American girl seated on a bright lemon-yellow chair. Her legs are spread eagled across the seat, she is leaning on her right elbow, head turned sideways revealing her pink glossy lips wrapped around her thumb. She wears a bright emerald green satin jacket that is unzipped to below her cleavage. The jacket is short enough to reveal her bare stomach, and her sky blue silk short shorts (they come to the crease between top of thigh and hip area) are emblazoned with huge emerald green cat eyes, one on each side of her hips, in a way that draws the spectator's eyes to her crotch area. She stares directly at the spectator with a seductive, come-and-get-me kind of look that communicates, "When I look like this I always get what I want, and I know it's what you want. Look at me, what are you waiting for?"

The third advertisement is for a Gucci swimming suit. The image is of a very thin, pubescent-bodied blond White model posed floating on her back with her right arm positioned behind her head. She is seen directly from above, affirming her availability and vulnerability. Her black-and-red string bikini slides up to the inside of her inner thighs just enough to reveal her tan lines and what appears to be shadows or a hint of pubic hair. Her lips are slightly parted and her gaze is directly at the spectator, with a slightly defiant and yet accessible look. Her gaze conveys a longing and waiting; she invites the viewer to watch and implies, "Look at me as long as you want, I am not going anywhere."

In the fourth advertisement for Marc Jacobs clothing, the model, who is photographed from above, reclines on her left elbow, wears a tiny strapped cream-colored tank and bright orange short shorts that end at the thigh/hip crease. The shorts have a V pattern, with the vortex leading to the 1-to-2-inch wide crotch of the shorts. Her legs are parted; one is straight and the other bent, forming a V shape between them. She has candy-type plastic baubles attached to one strap of her top and the MJ monogram on the other. She is very thin, boyish in appearance. Her blondish brown hair is cut very short, in a boy style reminiscent of early Mia Farrow haircuts. She gazes up to and directly at the viewer. Her peach-colored lips are slightly parted.

Step 3: Deconstruction. Sexuality is an essential component of adolescent curiosity and, based on media representations, a clear path to popularity with peers and most importantly, with boys. It is a time of conflicting demands—she should appeal to boys, but not too much; appear vampish, but be virginal. While her "parts"—breasts, hips—are developing, she is also learning what those parts do, are expected to do, and what behaviors accompany becoming feminine in American society. Thus, she learns to fashion, adopt, and present a false self (Goffman, 1976). On the inside, she might be shy, innocent, and insecure. However, as shown in the La Perla advertisement, for example, the self she shows to the world might be seductively posed, use seductive language, and her appearance might be suggestive. Kate Moss (and all things Calvin) was frequently portrayed as child-like and exploitable—frolicking in her underpants or lying naked on a sofa. Lederer (1995) pointed out that "use of the pseudo-child technique—adults dressing and acting like children—is standard fare in pornography" (p. 139). In the Baby Phat and Gucci advertisements, the "serious facial expressions, the absence of clothing, the adult hairstyles and makeup, and body gestures and postures" all contribute to making the girl models appear older (Cortese, 1999, p. 65). Conversely, the Marc Jacobs

advertisement reverses the younger-to-older-looking technique by applying childlike cosmetics and presentation methods to a model who is clearly not a child.

Step 4: Diagnosis. Myths are recurring stories "that determine a society's perspectives about the world, about themselves, about what behaviors and approaches have meaning or value *beyond* the real" (Galician, 2004, p. 34). They are the mainstay of media content and communicate a version of reality or truth. Using images of prepubescent and pubescent girls (or grown women made to look that way) in advertising activates and facilitates voyeuristic fantasies about what is appropriate, inappropriate, possessable, and safe. Although there are some variations, taboos against sexual predation on children are nearly universal. Yet there remains a level of curiosity about children as sexual beings, even if that thought is simultaneously expunged.

Step 5: Design. What would be a realistic reframing of these advertisements? I suggest using girls in advertisements targeted toward girls and portraying them in healthy and realistic ways that have relevance to their lives. If the advertised product or brand is an article of clothing or fashion line, then it logically follows to show that item in a realistic way on realistic-looking examples of the intended target of the advertisement. For example, if the product is a swimsuit, why not show the model swimming? How likely is this? Not very. Despite research that suggests otherwise, sex is still thought to sell, even if what is being sold is not the product per se but rather the idea of a sexual connection between consumer and product.

Step 6: Debriefing. An oppositional reading of these advertisements reveals that what is really for sale goes beyond the product (if the product is even shown in the advertisements). As a site of power, the body is "conceived in terms of being inscribed, constituted or rendered meaningful in representation and culture" (Lewis, 2002, p. 302). In the Gucci advertisement, for example, the model's body is displayed in ways that communicate availability and willingness. The body as text is written on in a way that is decipherable through use of sexual referents defined as "message elements (visual or verbal) that serve to elicit or educe sexual thoughts" (Reichert, 2003, p. 23).

According to Foucault, as described by Lewis (2002), sex is discussed and presented by social institutions to control it, which by extension also can "incite and facilitate modes of sexual experience" (p. 302). A symbolic reading of adolescent girl bodies in fashion advertisements reveals that what is being procured, offered, and sold is a point of view that supports an ideology that sexualizes girls and infantilizes women to control them and to legitimize that control.

The implications, discussed further in the conclusion, of these representations are serious and far reaching. Three stand out: (a) soft porn portrayals encourage the sexual exploitation of girls, (b) sexual portrayals contribute to the fetishization of girls and women in the media, and (c) passive and eroticized images foster an overall climate that does not value girls' and women's voices or contributions to society.

Step 7: Dissemination. This approach to media analysis speaks to the need for knowledge followed by action. Fortunately, several media literacy groups challenge stereotypical portrayals of girls and women. The Internet provides fertile ground for planting the seeds of online activism. Activist Web sites, such as About-face.org and adiosbarbie.com, teach and use media literacy skills in analyses of images and offer suggestions for taking action, such as writing to companies, boycotting products, organizing local protests, and forming positive images.

Conclusion

I don't want to be part of someone's Lolita thing.

—Britney Spears

This brief study uses media literacy as a framework to explore portrayals of girls as women and women as girls in fashion advertising. The Lolita look is not only found in fashion advertisements; rather, it is a multimedia phenomenon, the negative effects of which (high teen pregnancy rates, sex slavery, sexually transmitted diseases among teens and preteens, eating disorders, and suicide) are predicted by accumulation theory (DeFleur & Dennis, 1994). Steed (1994) found, for example, that as adult sex offenders "got older, they found their predilections reinforced by mainstream culture, movies and rock videos that glorify violent males who dominate younger, weaker sex objects" (p. 138).

Several questions need to be examined in future work. These include (a) What message(s) do images like these send to young girls about sex? (b) What message(s) do images like these send to young boys about sex? (c) What do images like these suggest to older men about girls? (d) In what ways might this be dangerous? (e) Are there connections between how young models are portrayed in fashion magazines and child pornography? and (f) What are the political economics of adolescent erotics? As parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, citizens, and scholars, we should be concerned about this.

In 1997, the dead body of 6-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey was found in the basement of her parent's Boulder, Colorado, home. She had been beaten, and most reports say she had been sexually assaulted (Cottle, 1997, p. 21). Although the perpetrator of the crime remains unknown, media coverage of the investigation featured repeated displays of beauty-contest and promotional photographs that came "from the deceased's pageant portfolio, professional glossies showing the petite six-year-old dolled up to look twice her age" (Cottle, 1997, p. 21). Some speculate it was this glamorized, sexualized look that motivated her assault and murder. According to Cottle (1997), "despite JonBenet's youth, [she] embodied the dual nature of Woman as The Virgin and The Whore, that nebulous combination of innocence and sexuality that has long titillated Man" (p. 21). Thus, "girls packaged to sell products or ideas to an adult market-place are not making active choices to be sexual" (Asher, 2002, p. 22). Returning to JonBenet, she "was turned into a fashion plate before she could even dress herself" (Cottle, 1997, p. 24).

Similar to content that is regarded as "kiddie porn," sexualized images of girls in advertisements have the potential to contribute to the ongoing and increasing problem of child sexual abuse. These kinds of representations indirectly condone use of children in inappropriate sexual contexts and "not only focus and allow desire but also erase various social and political complications" (Kincaid, 1998, p. 20). The display of children as sexual objects, as sites of spectacle where "pleasure, desire, and commodification intersect" (Giroux, 1996, p. 16), works to desensitize and thus, sets new standards for what is acceptable. The ubiquity of sexual representations in advertising also communicates to children that this is something adults condone and the glamorization of which celebrates girls as sexual objects. Even more alarming is the "myth that children want to be sexually used by adults—paralleling the age-old myth women want to be raped" thereby supporting the concatenation of pedophiles that children are asking for "it" (Davidson, 1997, p. 61). Similarly, the "double-dealing that dresses the erotic woman as a child" (Kincaid, 1995, p. 105) reinforces the powerlessness of women and children in American society. Has Lolita been revived? Some argue she never went to sleep; rather, that by continuously representing her in media, "the sexualized girl-child 'Lolita' has become a cultural icon" (Albright, 2002, para. 1). What is important to note is the lack of agency little girls have in the process of becoming desirable.

Note

1. Three of the advertisements can be viewed at the following Web sites: (a) <http://www.laperla.com>, (b) <http://www.babyphat.com>, and (c) <http://www.about-face.org> (Gucci).

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