



FACILITATION GUIDE
Sexy Inc. Our Children Under Influence–
Youth Version

Film summary

Documentary by Sophie Bissonnette

Producers: Patricia Bergeron and Yves Bisailon (NFB)

Canada - 2009 - 26 min 21 s

Are our children being rushed into adulthood too quickly? *Sexy Inc. - Our Children Under Influence - Youth Version* analyzes the hypersexualization of our environment and the noxious effects this has on young people. In Sophie Bissonnette's documentary, psychologists, teachers and school nurses speak out and criticize the unhealthy culture created by marketing and advertising media. A wealth of concrete examples shows how marketers and advertisers are targeting children, reducing them to mere consumers, and bombarding them with sexual images that turn them into sexual objects. Troubling testimony reveals that sexist stereotyping and precocious exposure to Internet pornography is seriously harming children's development. This film is a rallying cry to action and offers several ways to fight these disturbing phenomena.



CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES¹

This facilitation guide is to be used along with the documentary *Sexy Inc. – Our Children Under Influence – Youth Version*. Its goal is to make young people aware of the issues surrounding sexualization. It is designed to encourage viewers to discuss and share their thoughts and ideas, to develop critical thinking and to explore strategies to find solutions to these issues. It was developed to be used in facilitating three workshops for young people aged 14 to 17.

The guide can be used in a variety of contexts and venues: secondary schools, youth groups, youth services centres, community centres, educational workshops for young people, etc. Ideally, each workshop should last about 75 minutes.

¹ Y des femmes de Montréal (YWCA) and Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM (2007). *Sexy inc. Nos enfants sous influence : Guide d'animation*, p. 3. Adapted by Isabelle Lepage (2009).



N.B.

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE²

This facilitation guide has been designed to be used over the course of three workshops, each lasting 75 minutes:

- 1) The first workshop involves a **screening of the film *Sexy Inc. Our Children Under Influence – Youth Version*, followed by a group discussion;**
- 2) The second workshop examines how **women and men are portrayed in advertising;**
- 3) The third workshop explores **concrete strategies for preventing sexualization.**

This guide has been developed according to a three-fold pedagogical approach, based on the observation of reality through the film, sharing of ideas about sexualization and the exploration of strategies to counter it.

Taking a closer look at your environment

The first workshop consists of viewing the film, followed by a discussion. This is intended to encourage young people to identify how hypersexualization manifests itself in their daily lives. They will make a connection between what they hear and see in the film and their own experiences. In this way, they will develop an awareness of sexualization and its presence in their immediate environment.

Questioning sexualization

The first workshop also helps young people analyze the phenomenon of sexualization. This will help them identify its origins, related factors (beauty, seduction, relations between the sexes, etc.) and its negative consequences for girls and boys. They will make connections between the topics they discuss and their own lives.

The second workshop will enable young people to think about the images of women and men they see in various types of advertising (e.g. for clothing, perfume and other products). This will give them an opportunity to analyze how the ads use a variety of codes based on sexism to portray women and men (e.g. environment, activities, clothing and the body). They will then be able to decode several sexist stereotypes in the ads.

Exploring concrete strategies

The goal of the third workshop is exploring concrete strategies to combat sexualization. Participants can choose from a variety of creative projects designed to help them take a stand by denouncing an advertising poster, an audiovisual ad or any commercial product. Drawing from discussions in previous workshops, they can design their own creative project. This workshop will encourage young people to react to and to question the sexualized world in which they are growing up.

² Y des femmes de Montréal (YWCA) and Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM (2007). *Sexy inc. Nos enfants sous influence : Guide d'animation*, p. 4. Adapted by Isabelle Lepage (2009).



PREPARING FOR THE DISCUSSION³

- View the film *Sexy Inc. – Our Children Under Influence – Youth Version* before beginning a discussion with the young people.
- Get to know the definitions of sexualization suggested in this guide to better understand the phenomenon.
- Study the proposed questions and choose those which pertain to the young people in your group.
- Become familiar with each workshop's content and structure, as well as the appendices.
- Consult the resources provided at the end of the guide. They could be useful if you are asked for additional information on this subject.
- Be aware of your role as facilitator: to encourage participants to share their thoughts, engage in discussions and reflect. You are not required to act as an expert on the subject.
- Remember that in taking a position and expressing your values before an audience of young people, you are not judging them. Rather, in stating your own views, you can encourage them to carry on a real exchange of their own thoughts and values.

³ Y des femmes de Montréal (YWCA) and Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM (2007). *Sexy inc. Nos enfants sous influence : Guide d'animation*, p. 5. Adapted by Isabelle Lepage (2009).



DEFINITIONS OF SEXUALIZATION⁴

“The act of giving a sexual characteristic to a product or behaviour which is not intrinsic to it.”

In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) published a report on sexualization and its impact on young people. The Association explained the phenomenon in the following way:

“There are several components to sexualization, and these set it apart from healthy sexuality. Sexualization occurs when:

- o A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;

(For example, a girls’ soccer team wants to raise funds and the coach suggests making and selling a sexy calendar.)

- o A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;

(For example, magazine articles give pre-adolescent girls tips on how to look sexy to get boys to notice them: lose weight, put on make-up, etc.)

- o A person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making;

(For example, when a girl dressed in a sexy way is used to sell any kind of product in ads.)

- o Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

(For example, a child wears very short clothes and a T-shirt with the logo: “Babe!” or “Sexy Girl.”)

All four conditions need not be present; any one is an indication of sexualization. ... Anybody (girls, boys, men, women) can be sexualized. ... not only women or young girls.”

American Psychological Association (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, Executive Summary, p.1.

⁴ Y des femmes de Montréal (YWCA) and Service aux collectivités de l’UQAM (2007). *Sexy inc. Nos enfants sous influence : Guide d’animation*, p. 6. Adapted by Isabelle Lepage (2009).



If you decide to suggest this definition to young people, make sure that you make it easy for them to understand its meaning. Restate the criteria in your own words because young people aged 14 to 17 may find it hard to understand these concepts.

If you wish to use a simpler definition, you can use the one given by Bouchard and Bouchard (2004), who state that sexualization is an action consisting in “giving a sexual characteristic to a product or a behaviour which is not, in itself, sexual.”

What does this mean in concrete terms?

- Clothing that draws attention to parts of the body (low neckline, low-riding pants, clingy sweater, etc.)
- Accessories or products clearly emphasizing some traits and hiding “defects” (make-up, tattoos, piercings, high heels, padded bras, etc.)
- Changes to the body aimed at emphasizing sexual characteristics or signals (waxing hair to remove it from body or genitals, bodybuilding (arms and buttocks, etc.).
- Medical or surgical procedures that change the body into an artificial object (breast implants, collagen lip injection).
- Body movements that send a message of sexual availability (open mouth, tongue glossing over the lips, heaving breasts, swaying hips).
- Sexual behaviour focusing on the genitals and submission to another.

What is the difference between sexualization and so-called healthy sexuality?⁵

As a social phenomenon, *sexualization* exists outside an individual: It implies the external pressures that society imposes on individuals, influencing them to strive to attain an ideal sexual image. More specifically, sexualization is:

- Sexuality focusing exclusively on the genitals; an act that is mechanical, fast and consumable;
- Sexuality without consequences;
- Dehumanization and objectification of the human body.

Healthy sexuality, on the other hand, is a personal phenomenon in that it lies at the heart of the personal and individual experience of each person. It implies:

- Mutual respect between consenting partners;

⁵ Y des femmes de Montréal (YWCA) (2009). *Guide d'accompagnement de la formation sur la sexualization des jeunes*, p. 41.



- Equality;
- True consent;
- Partner safety;
- Integrity;
- Intimacy promoting the development of meaningful connections and sharing of pleasure between partners;
- Respecting each other's rhythm;
- Entering into a sexual relationship with pleasure and desire, not through obligation.

In conclusion, sexual health or healthy sexuality means:

*[...] a **state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality**. It is not decreased by the presence of illness, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a **positive and respectful approach to sexuality** and sexual relations, as well as the possibility of pleasant and safe experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. To achieve and maintain sexual health, the **sexual rights of each individual must be protected.**⁷*



WORKSHOP 1:
Discussion after film screening

Taking a Closer Look at Your Environment
and Questioning Sexualization



Facilitation Plan: Workshop 1

1. Presentation

Duration: 5 minutes

Procedure:

Introduce yourself to the group. If the group members do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves briefly.

2. Workshop Introduction

Duration: 5 minutes

Procedure:

Give participants a brief overview of the workshops by stating the main discussion themes and activities.

3. Show the film *Sexy Inc. – Our Children Under Influence – Youth Version*

Duration: 30 minutes

Material: Film *Sexy Inc. – Our Children Under Influence – Youth Version*

Procedure:

- a. Show the film *Sexy Inc. – Our Children Under Influence – Youth Version* using the film summary (see page 2) to outline the main points :
 - Analysis of the sexualization phenomenon by specialists and professionals working in this field;
 - Explanation of the sexualization phenomenon using examples from participants' own lives: video clips, ads, clothing styles and TV shows;
 - Power of the media and marketing, both in portraying women and men in a sexualized and sexist manner and conveying sexual stereotypes;
 - Fight against the trivialization of sexuality and against sexist images by adopting concrete strategies.

- b. Watch the film with the group (approximate duration: 26 minutes).

4. Review and discussion of the film

Duration: 30 minutes

Material: Resource text 1: *Hypersexualization? Useful information and strategy guide.*

Procedure:

After watching the film, encourage the young viewers to engage in a discussion by using questions from the two sections below: **Taking a closer look at your environment and questioning sexualization.**



As mentioned above, it is important to choose those questions that will speak to your young audience members. In this way, you will be able to avoid unsettling them or making them feel uncomfortable.

Questions about the film (Taking a closer look at your environment)

- What is your immediate reaction to this film?
- What does sexualization mean to you? What is this phenomenon all about?
- Do you feel that sexualization affects you in any way? Why?
- The film shows specialists giving several examples of sexualized behaviour among young people. What are they? How do you feel about these types of behaviour?
- The film shows several children's toys, created by male and/or female artists, which promote sexualization by using sexist stereotypes. What toys or which artists? What messages are these toys giving to children?
- A specialist mentions the idea of *girl power* and recalls that, in the 1970s, this movement's goal was sexual freedom and equality between the sexes. Today, this idea mostly means that women's only real power comes from this sexy clothing. Do you agree with this statement? What does *girl power* mean to you? Explain your answer.
- The phenomenon of sexualization is also present in ads using young children. One such example is the ad showing a young girl and her doll, both wearing identical sexy outfits. What is your reaction to this?
- The film mentions that young people, especially girls, are a target for marketing specialists. In your opinion, what is the reason for this?
- The film shows that the Internet provides young people with easy access to degrading, violent and sexist images, mainly via pornographic sites. What do you think about the accessibility of these images?
- The film shows young children having fun colouring clothing on an ad showing a half-dressed jeans model. The adults supervising this activity then send the children's drawings to the companies concerned. What are your thoughts about this?

Questions related to the analysis of the sexualization phenomenon (Questioning sexualization)

- Does the phenomenon of sexualization manifest itself in your environment (family, friends, school, favourite meeting places for young people, etc.?) What examples can you give?
- In your opinion, are girls more affected by this phenomenon than boys? Explain your answer. (See resource guide 1: *Hypersexualization? Useful information and strategy guide*).
- What are the consequences of sexualization for the lives of young people? (See resource guide 1: *Hypersexualization? Useful information and strategy guide*).
- How would you define the following words: handsome/beautiful and sexy? (Pay special attention to the fact that beauty can take a variety of different forms.)
- Is it important to be sexy at your age? Why?



- Being sexy helps to fill needs. Which ones?
- What is seduction? What are the essential components of seducing a person? (Verbal and non-verbal behaviours, personality traits, etc.)
- Do you think that being sexy and seductive are ways of obtaining power? Why?
- What is a stereotype? Can you name a few? What effect can they have on our lives as girls and boys growing up?
- Which well-known artists or people from among your friends and family are good role models? Why?
- Advertising creates needs by using images in order to convince us to buy. Is being a consumer important? Why?
- How can we become aware consumers?
- What actions would you like to undertake to oppose the phenomenon of sexualization?

5. Conclusion

Duration: 5 minutes

Procedure:

Summarize the main elements expressed in the discussion. Ask the young people what they thought of the discussion.



WORKSHOP 2:
**Portrayal of women and men in
advertising**

**QUESTIONING THE PHENOMENON OF
SEXUALIZATION**



Facilitation Plan: Workshop 2

Before beginning this workshop, make photocopies of the ads featuring women and men for each team (Appendix 2).

1. Review of workshop 1

Duration: 5 minutes

Procedure:

Begin the meeting by reviewing workshop 1, using the following question:

- What lasting impressions do you have about the film or the discussion from workshop 1?

2. Activity “Decoding advertising!”

Duration: 15 minutes

Material:

- Appendix 1: Analysis grid
- Appendix 2: Women and men in advertising
- Appendix 3: Personality of women and men
- Reference text 2: *Sexism in advertising : decoding images*
- Blackboard or marker board
- Chalk or markers
- Ball-point pens or pencils

Procedure:

- a. Introduce the workshop objective: analyzing ads to question the portrayal of women and men in advertisements.
- b. Ask group members to form teams. Ask each team to use the analysis grid (Appendix 1) to identify differences and similarities in how women and men are portrayed in ads (Appendix 2). Explain the four codes to be analyzed: environment (what is the image’s context?), activities (what activities are being shown?), clothing and body (see page 13, code analysis grid of reference text 2: *Sexism in advertising: decoding images*).
- c. Distribute a copy of the analysis grid (Appendix 1) and a copy of the ads featuring women and men (Appendix 2) to each team. Explain to team members that they are to fill in the grid by following directions given in Appendix 1.

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3. Activity and discussion review

Duration: 30 minutes



Material:

- Blackboard or marker board
- Chalk or markers

Procedure:

- Conduct a review with the entire group by asking the young people to share their main observations, based on their answers for the analysis grid. Write these down on the grid (Appendix 1) that you have reproduced on a blackboard or a conference pad. Highlight the major differences or similarities between images of women and men in the ads, as identified by the participants.
- Begin a discussion using the following questions :
 - What are your reactions or comments after analyzing these ads?
 - What do these ads say about being a woman or a man? What do you think about that?
 - What stereotypes about women and men do these ads convey?
 - What messages are these ads sending us? What do you think about that?
 - Do these advertising images influence us? How?

4. Activity “Imagining Personality”**Duration: 20 minutes****Material:**

- Blackboard or marker board
- Chalk or markers

Procedure:

Put up all the ads in Appendix 3, so that everyone can see them. Ask the young people to imagine the personality of the people they see in the ads. Using the three following questions, write participants' answers on the board:

- What personality traits does this woman seem to have? What traits do these men seem to have? (What are their tastes, interests, hobbies, wishes, dreams, etc.?)
- What adjectives would best describe this woman or these men?
- Which parts of the ad enable you to observe or to state this?



Teacher's Notes:

- Read reference text 2 carefully: *Sexism in advertising: decoding images*. It explains the various codes that can be analyzed in ads portraying women and men.

-Take extra care in facilitating the discussion during the activity: "Decoding advertising!" In this way, you can probe what is behind the image and expose the main stereotypes, as well as the sexist nature of the ads.



SEXY INC.
OUR CHILDREN UNDER INFLUENCE

WORKSHOP 3:
**Fighting sexualization and its
consequences**

EXPLORING CONCRETE STRATEGIES



Facilitation Plan: Workshop 3

This workshop can be given in two separate 75-minute sessions. The first can be reserved for the preparation of the creative project, followed by the second 75-minute session in which each team presents its project.

Before beginning the workshop, choose the posters, ads or products about which young people are likely to lodge a complaint.

1. Activity “Let’s do something about sexualization!”

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

These will vary according to the creative project chosen.

- Reference text 3: *How to take action against a sexist ad, step by step.*
- Posters, audiovisual ads or commercial products, chosen in advance
- Arts and crafts supplies (magazines, newspapers, felt-tipped markers, scissors, glue, etc.)
- Bristol board
- Sticky tack or adhesive tape
- Pen
- Lined paper
- Costumes

Procedure:

- a. Tell participants that this activity calls for them to form teams and work together to produce a creative project; protesting against an advertising poster, audiovisual ad or commercial product.

Written complaints can be addressed to the ASC (Advertising Standards Canada), CBSC (Canadian Broadcast Standards Council), OPC (Office de la protection du consommateur/Consumer Protection Bureau), etc. To help the young people write their complaint, read reference text 3: *How to take action against a sexist ad, step by step.* The advertising posters or audiovisual ads can be sent to the companies marketing the product.

- b. Introduce the four creative projects in the following way:

Advertising poster

- Participants denounce a sexist, stereotypical or sexy advertising poster they have seen in the street, near a shopping mall, in the subway, etc., by creating a new one which is non-sexist, non-stereotypical and non-sexy.
- Examples of ads that you can show participants include: Bud Camp by Budweiser Beer, La Senza/La Vie en Rose lingerie ad campaigns, etc.



Audiovisual advertising

- Young people denounce a sexist, stereotypical or sexy TV or Internet ad by creating a new ad using non-sexist, non-stereotypical and non-sexy skits or improvisations. They can either perform their creations later for the entire group or videotape them, depending on the time available.
- Examples of televised ads that you can show young people are: ads for the high energy drink Octane 7.0, for Axe, etc.

Letter

- Lodge a complaint against a sexist, stereotypical or sexy product (clothing, children's toy, video game, etc.) seen in a store or an ad. They write a letter to a company, a retail business or an organization to take a stand against the sexism, stereotypes and sexualization of the product in question.
- Examples: lingerie aimed at very young girls, Bratz babies, etc.

Poster against sexism

- Create a poster to protest sexism in general or the sexualization of participants' environment, by creating a collage or drawings.
- The poster could use the discussion elements from the preceding workshops, as well as the elements of the analysis grid.

- c. Divide the group into teams of four or five (or according to the number of young people in the group) to work on projects together.

2. Activity and discussion review

Duration: 45 minutes

Material needed: Varies according to project chosen

Procedure:

- a. Ask each team to present its creative project to the rest of the group. Ask these questions :
 - What parts of your project enable you to denounce sexualization?
 - What elements guided you in your reflection to create the guidelines for your project?
- b. After all teams have had a chance to present their creative project, ask the group to vote for the one they prefer and justify their choice. Together with the young people, prepare an official package to be sent on for each project.



Teacher's Notes:

- Even though participants work in teams, you can:

1. Allot a different creative project to each team;
2. Choose one of the creative projects and have all teams work on that one;
3. Let each team decide which creative project the team would like to work on.

This workshop enables young people to mobilize against sexualization so mailing their project is an essential step.



APPENDICES



Appendix 1: Analysis Grid

Hint:

As a team, fill in this grid for the ads featuring women and men. Identify the similarities and differences between the women and men according to the following codes: environment, activities, clothing and body.

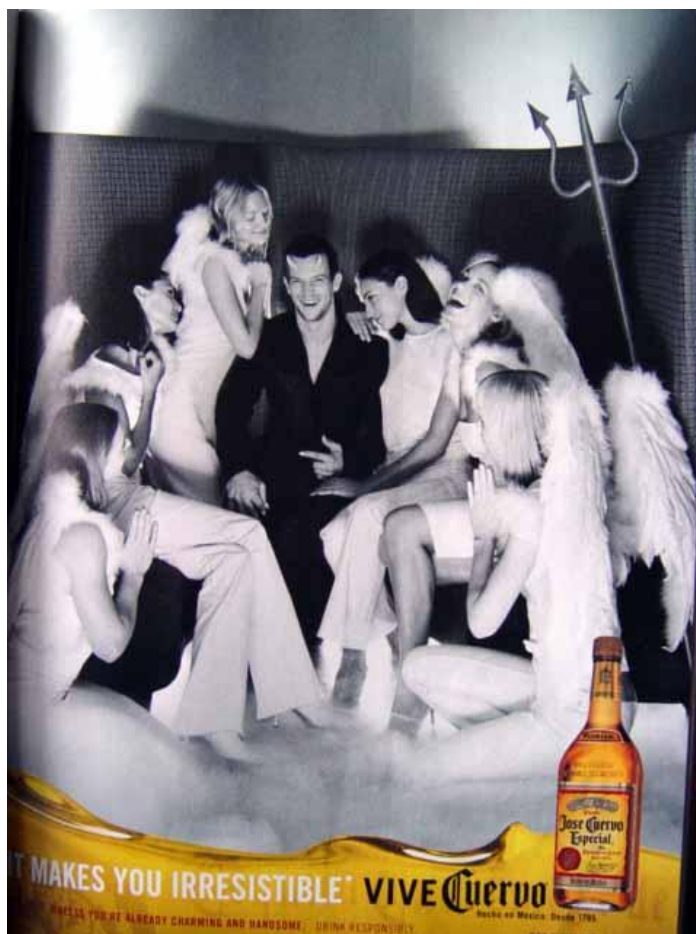
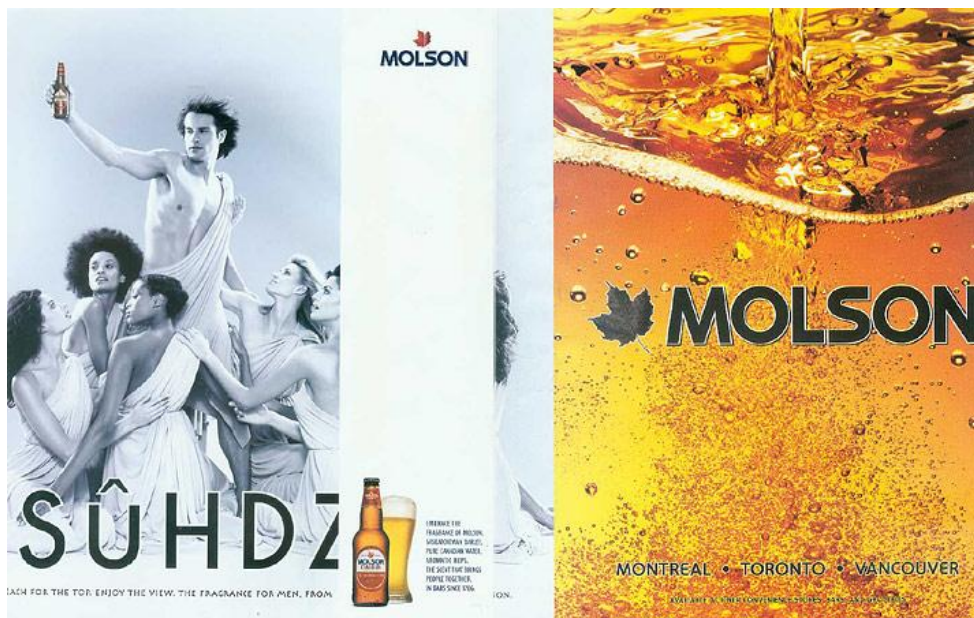
	WOMEN	MEN
ENVIRONMENT		
ACTIVITIES		
CLOTHING		
BODY		

What differences or similarities can you see, as a rule, in the portrayal of women and men?

Appendix 2: Ads featuring women and men

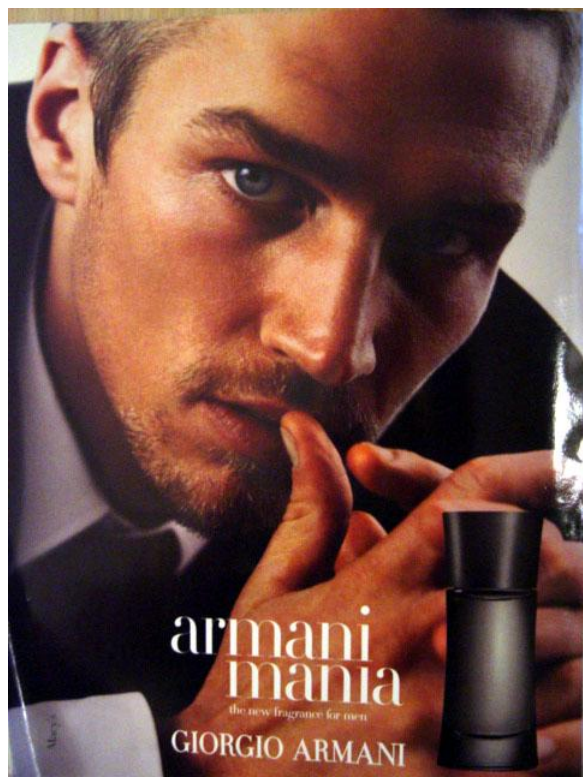
Warning:

The photos can only be used in workshops proposed in this guide. Any other use requires a special permit.



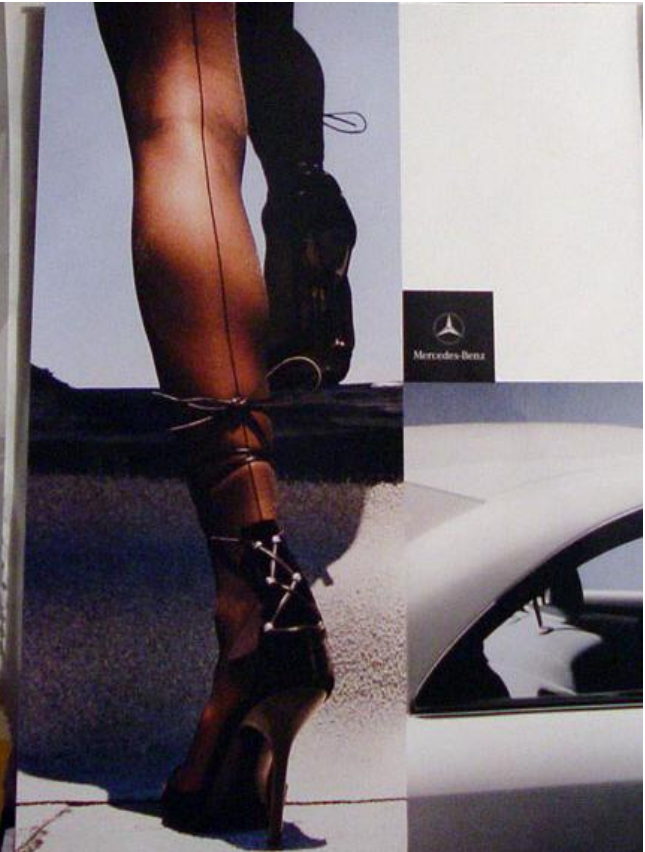






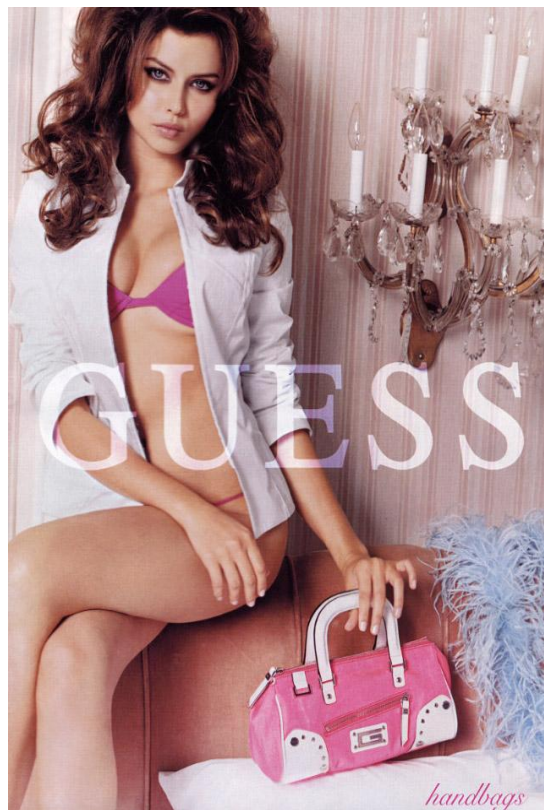
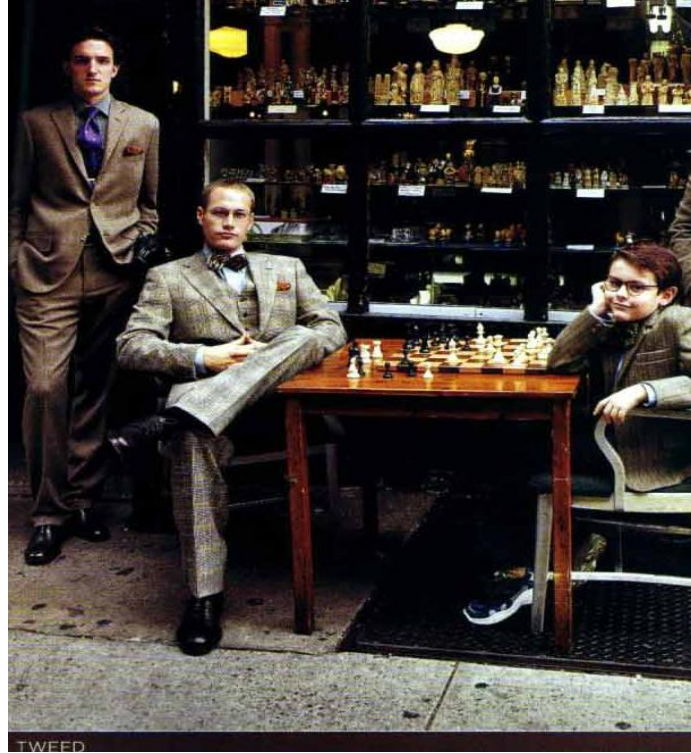


...and if it is to see yourself. You're overcome by its distinction, individuality that mirrors your own





Appendix 3: Personalities of women and men



REFERENCE TEXTS

Resource Text 1

Excerpt from *Hypersexualization? Useful Information and Action Guide*⁶

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE AFFECTED BY HYPERSEXUALIZATION...

Young children and adolescents are at a stage where they are building their identity; consequently they are especially vulnerable to the phenomenon of hypersexualization. At an age when young people question their appearance, sexual orientation, and sexuality, they become increasingly sensitive to the models shown them by the adult world. This world encourages them to use sexuality to attain power.

Marketing campaigns are increasingly targeting young girls. Barbie dolls are sold wearing G-string bikini bottoms. Girls are bombarded with ads for lip gloss, make-up and sexy clothes. Teenage girls, their idols, and girls's magazines encourage them to use their physical appearance to please others and obtain peer approval. In this way, they are taught to define themselves and value themselves through the eyes of others.

Teenage boys are also affected by the messages they receive from society. These messages, however, are very different. Their idols, pop singers, video game and movie heroes are shown as free, strong, sturdy, independent, holding the power in a love relationship, obsessed with women and sex, violent, full of rage and totally devoid of sensitivity.¹ Because of the proliferation of Internet pornographic sites, many young people are learning about sex by watching pornography, and this remains their main reference point in sexual matters.

CONSEQUENCES OF HYPERSEXUALIZATION FOR GIRLS

Young girls and adolescents are under daily pressure from the media and their friends. The message they get is clear: They must be beautiful, sexy and sexually available. Some are led to believe that their only source of power is their appearance and so they struggle every day to be physically *perfect* and sexy women.

In emphasizing their appearance, young girls develop a dependence on the approval of others and become exceedingly vulnerable. What's more, the imposition of unrealistic standards by the beauty industry, advertising and media may lead to low self-esteem. These consequences can lead to other negative effects such as increased feelings of shame and anxiety, loss of mental acumen, and onset of depression.²

This glorification of appearance and seduction as a way of connecting with others puts the physical health of young girls at risk. They are prone to eating disorders, yoyo dieting from a very early age, drugs and alcohol, smoking, plastic surgery, risky precocious sexual relations, sexual problems including loss of libido, as well as the entire array of problems connected to contraception, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), and unplanned pregnancy.

According to U.S. data: "Young women who have a strong tendency to define femininity, mainly through a woman's body image, have fewer tendencies to express their personal desires in sexual relations. Consequently, they are less likely to express their desire to

⁶ CALACS de Rimouski (2009). *Hypersexualization? Guide pratique d'information et d'action*, p. 14-15, 18-19, 22 et 24-26.

experience sexual satisfaction, to refuse a sexual relation they do not want, and to insist on protecting themselves against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).”³

Girls might possibly participate in certain sexual practices, not because they truly desire them, but to respond to the requests of others, to be accepted or to be part of the norm.

CONSEQUENCES THAT HAVE BEEN OBSERVED IN GIRLS

- Probability that girls will have a lower sense of self-worth increases with precocious sexuality.⁴
- Dissatisfaction with their body image leads many girls to want to alter their appearance and lose weight.⁶
- Eating disorders.⁷
- Exposure to sexual content on a regular basis leads to greater acceptance of sexual and sexist stereotypes.⁸
- The amount of sexual content observed in the media influences the sexual precocity of young girls.⁹
- The promotion of sexuality without risk could explain the rise in sexually transmitted infections in young people.¹⁰
- Sexual precocity increases the probability of being subjected to psychological, physical or sexual violence.¹¹
- Girls are engaging in undesired sexual relationships and practices.¹²

CONSEQUENCES OF HYPERSEXUALIZATION FOR BOYS

While society gives girls the message that appearance is paramount, it encourages boys to be handsome and toned, but also macho, rich¹³ and sexually active..

These messages have consequences for young people. Boys also want to be desirable; they do not want to disappoint and some will feel pushed to act in certain ways to gain acceptance by their peer group. And so, since sexual activity – and talking about it – is considered cool, many boys will feel pressured to perform sexually, to try different practices, and sometimes to have several partners.

What’s more, through the messages and behaviour of their idols on TV reality shows, or of their peers, sexual practices essentially focusing on masculine pleasure such as fellatio and sodomy are promoted. There is no regard for their partners’ wishes or pleasure.

Encouraged by sexist and often violent messages targeting women, some boys and adolescents adopt behaviours characterized by disdain, violence or domination towards girls and women.

Many boys, just as many girls, will learn about sex by pornography, thereby assimilating an unreal and restrictive idea of sexuality and couple relationships.

CONSEQUENCES OF HYPERSEXUALIZATION FOR BOYS

- Repeated exposure to sexual content results in greater tendency to believe sexual and sexist stereotypes.¹⁶
- Boys state that they are dissatisfied with their body image, although to a lesser degree than girls.¹⁷
- Boys want to beef up their muscles¹⁸ and gain weight¹⁹ in contrast to girls who want to lose weight.
- The amount of sexual content in the media influences sexual precocity.²⁰
- Sexual precocity results in more sexual partners.²¹
- Promoting sexuality without risk could explain the increase of sexually transmitted infections in young people.²²
- Violence in romantic relationships is more frequent.²³

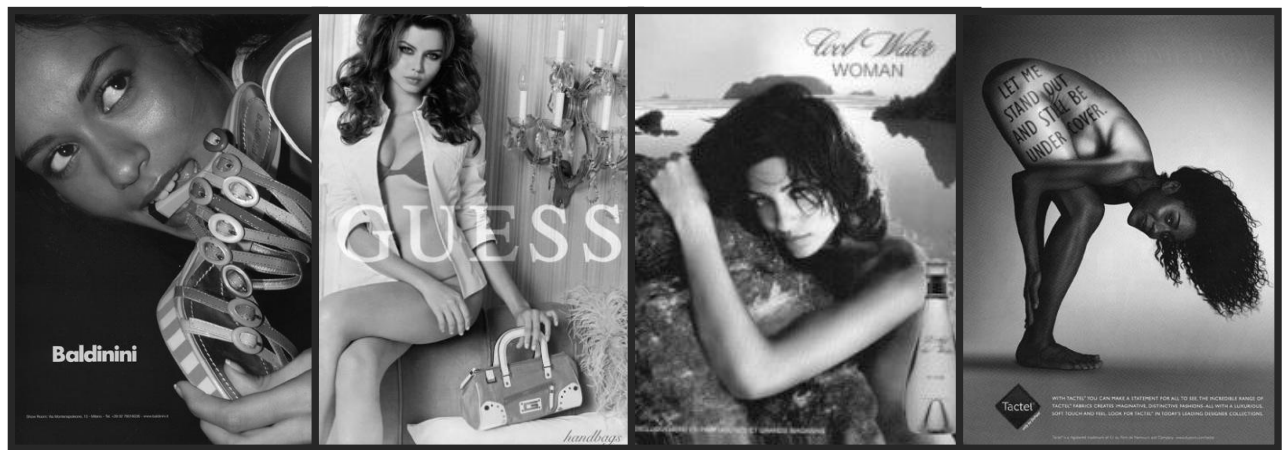
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Resource Text 2

Sexism in Advertising: Decoding Images



Document produced using data supplied by Josée Quenneville - La Meute-MédiAction.
http://www.lameute.fr/reseau_locales/cr_quebec.php3

This document is inspired by the theories of Goffman (1979)⁷ and de Herne (1993).⁸
Information about this document and the materials were supplied by La Meute-MédiAction.

Production of this document was made possible by the participation of Lilia Goldfarb,
Amélie Sauvé, Naïma Mimouni, Régine Tardieu-Berteau, Bénigna Hassler.

⁷ Goffman, Erving (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 84 pages.

⁸ Herne, Claude (1993). *La définition sociale de la femme à travers la publicité*. Collaboration de Femmes Prévoyantes Socialistes, Paris L'Harmattan et Bruxelles Contradictions, 214 pages.

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Introduction

La Meute <lameute.fr.reseau> is a network that has been fighting against sexist advertising since 2000. It is active in many countries, such as France, Belgium and Switzerland, and has been in Quebec since September 1, 2002, under the name La Meute-MédiAction <lameute.org>.

La Meute-MédiAction gave the Montreal Women's Y permission to use the materials presented in one of the workshops titled "Decoding Images." In this way, we can give girls and women today the opportunity to develop a critical mind with regard to advertising. This document is intended to sensitize you to the sexism that is pervasive in advertising and to enable you to intervene more effectively with girls and women in your environment.

What is sexism?

- ✓ Discriminatory attitude based on sex.⁹
- ✓ Discriminatory process in which personal characteristics are associated with a specific social role in an arbitrary, rigid, restrictive and repeated manner, with regard to one sex and not another.¹⁰
- ✓ Form of oppression. Oppression means the state of being disadvantaged by a system of power.¹¹ In the case of sexism, men wield power more often than women.

Consequences for women due to constant exposure to sexist ads: ¹²

- ✓ This kind of advertising locks us into restrictive patterns of thinking, in the sense that we end up with stereotypical notions of what a woman ought to be: specifically, the mother or the whore.
- ✓ Sexist advertising conveys unrealistic and unattainable images of women to us – images which we were all supposed to resemble. This produces guilt in women who are not able to attain these standards. Body image, self-esteem and self-confidence may be undermined. Some eating disorders also result (anorexia, bulimia).
- ✓ Sexist advertising transports us into a world permeated with sexuality. Almost all ads convey one or more representation of sexuality, either through eroticized nudity or by showing women as sexual objects.
- ✓ The world of advertising also constantly exposes us to pornography. Not only are women seen as sexual objects, they are chopped into pieces or turned into objects, actions usually connected with pornography. In a way, sexist advertising perverts the basic concepts normally associated with sexuality: intimacy, reciprocity, equality, etc.
- ✓ Violence can also be shown in a fictional way in advertising. This trivializes real violence against women and emphasizes the stereotypes of women's inferiority and men's superiority.

⁹ Office québécois de la langue française (2008). *Le grand dictionnaire terminologique*. Available online: <granddictionnaire.com/btml/fra/r_motclef/index800_1.asp>. Consulted May 26, 2008.

¹⁰ Elysa-UQAM (1999). *Lexique des termes sexologiques*. Available online: <elysa.uqam.ca/lexique.htm>. Consulted May 26, 2008.

¹¹ Y des femmes de Montréal. *Girls naming violence*. Workshop 2: Challenging oppression.

¹² Montreynaud, Florence (2001). Available online at the website of La Meute: <lameute.fr/doc_analyses/texte1a.php3>. Consulted July 16, 2008.

✓ Because advertising often emphasizes the image projected by women, the exhibition of their bodies and its effect on a third person, women and girls may develop a dependence on how others, specifically men, see them.

✓ Women and girls may modify their identity to match the image they project; they may have an unrealistic perception of women, etc.

Naturally, all these consequences could affect a woman's self-esteem and self-confidence, and could have major repercussions on other aspects of her life (work, friendships, romance, relationship with her own body, etc.).

These perverse effects are seen more frequently in young girls and adolescents. At a young age they are constructing their identity, and thus constantly searching for clues of what it means to be a girl or a woman. They can easily identify with what they see in the media, including in ads. This can lead to problems if they pay attention to the messages aimed at them.

We will begin by examining the various codes or criteria that are generally present in sexist ads, and we will then take a closer look at the different messages conveyed by sexist advertising. We will conclude by examining consequences of these messages and possible strategies to counter sexist ads.

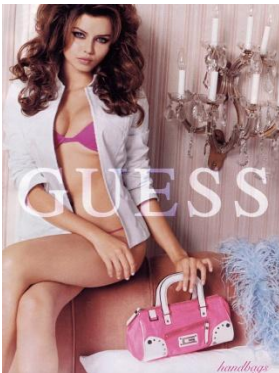
Codes

There are four distinct codes that enable us to identify the sexist nature of the advertising images that pervade our surroundings: environment, activities, clothing and body.

1. Environment

More often than not, the woman is seen in a closed environment, often an interior – a room for example. She is also seen in settings which are unfocused and undefined, thus making

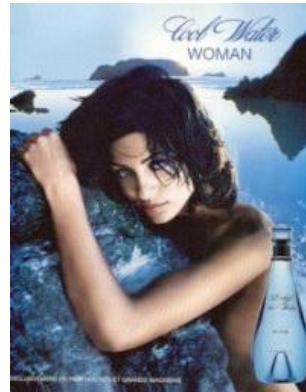
it difficult to place her in a clear context. What's more, when she is shown outside, she is very often in an exotic place that seems unreal.



Closed space



Unfocused or undefined space



Exotic, unreal space

2. Activities

Most ads depicting women show them in passive poses. They are doing nothing except posing for the camera. In contrast, men in ads are often shown in the midst of an activity, (playing soccer, surfing, etc.). Also, women are often shown in positions which are not natural, but strange, forced and artificial.

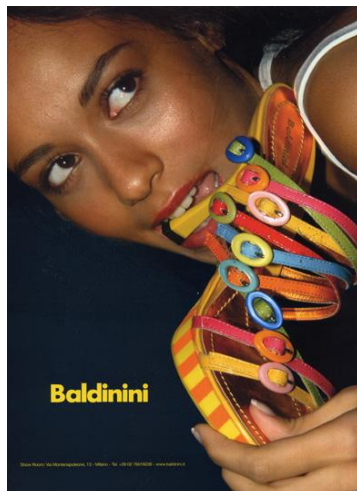
Women's positions in ads imply seduction. Their teasing positions target male readers, and respond more to men's desires.

Another trend has appeared in the activities shown in ads: Women are often portrayed performing actions in a hysterical way, appearing to be mindless or downright ridiculous.

In conclusion, we must identify the stereotypes in advertising today. After years of feminist struggle, women are still shown in traditional roles, such as that of the housewife.



Passivity, unnatural and seductive pose



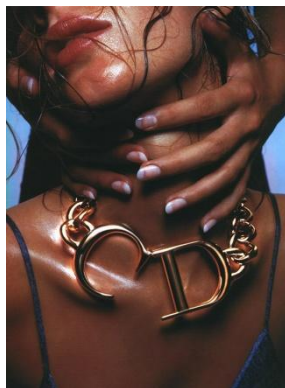
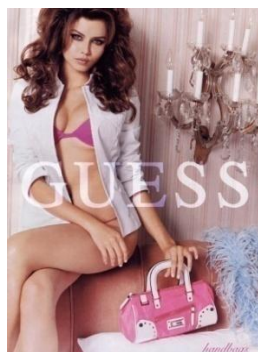
Ridiculous activity



Stereotypical activity

a. Hands

The hands we see in ads are always manicured, well groomed and held in an artificial manner. What is also striking is that women only touch the products, the elements which surround them or their bodies. Once again, this could refer to the stereotype of women's fragility or passivity.

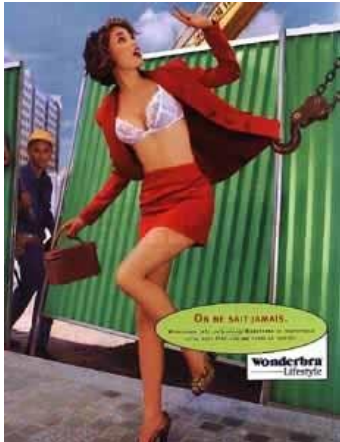


3. Clothing

When it comes to clothing, it's not too hard to identify the general trend shown in advertising. Today's catchword: being and appearing sexy.

Thus, women can be seen posing nude or semi-nude; they wear seductive clothing (often sexy and revealing), partly undone and leaving certain body parts on view; they wear red clothing (evoking passion, love), clothing that is completely wet and partly transparent, partially revealing or clinging to parts of their bodies; they are shown with plunging necklines. Some clothing is diaphanous and filmy, almost transparent.

Generally speaking, ads show women in clothes that are so flimsy as to be almost absent, and these are ads for any kind of product that they are selling. Men are often seen dressed in appropriate attire, or if not, they are usually selling underwear.



Red, unbuttoned clothing



Seductive and body-hugging



Seductive and wet



Diaphanous

4. Body

This code can be subdivided into sub-criteria, since several components must be considered when analyzing the body of women as shown in advertising.

a) Position

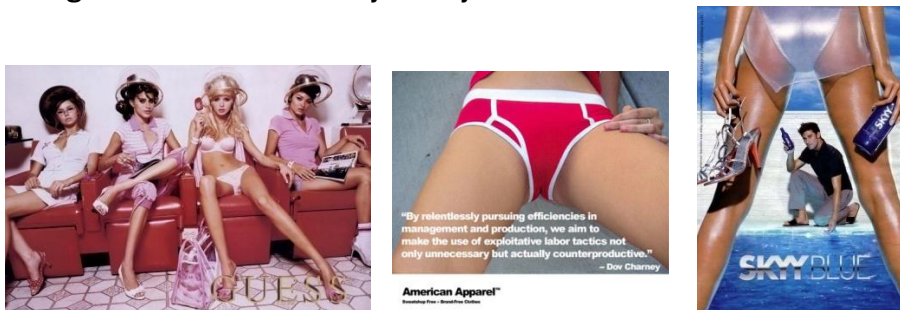
The position adopted by female models in ads can be evocative. For example, the woman is standing, with one knee bent more than the other and is wearing very high heels, which conveys the stereotypical idea that a woman is unbalanced, vulnerable and fragile.



Women are also very often portrayed in contorted positions, which are impossible to imitate or very uncomfortable:

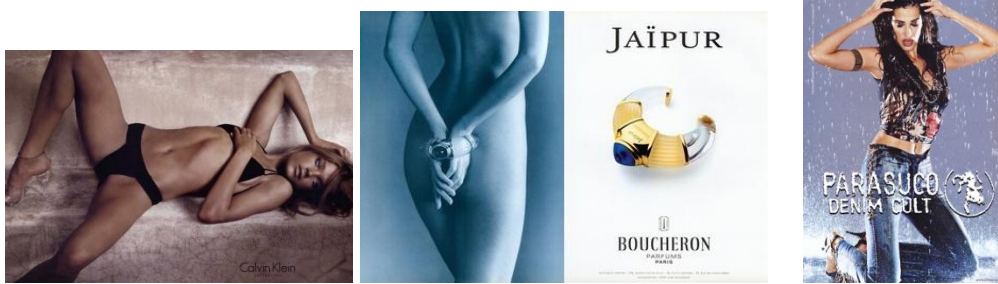


Another trend: women are often shown with legs spread apart, showing their crotch or their buttocks. This type of position emphasizes their sexual availability, and conveys the message that women are always ready for sex.



Finally, women are shown on all fours, on their knees, lying in a suggestive manner (also evoking sexuality) or portrayed in such a way that the viewer sees only their back and/or

their buttocks; this once again emphasizes the victimization and sexual availability of women.



The body of a woman can be fragmented and only one part shown – that part which is deemed “interesting.” This technique emphasizes sexual availability or imbues the ad with an undertone of violence.

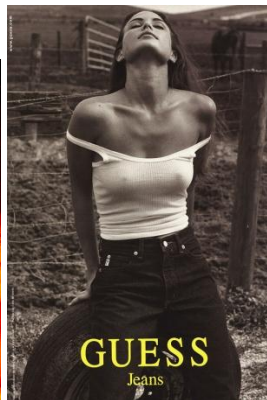
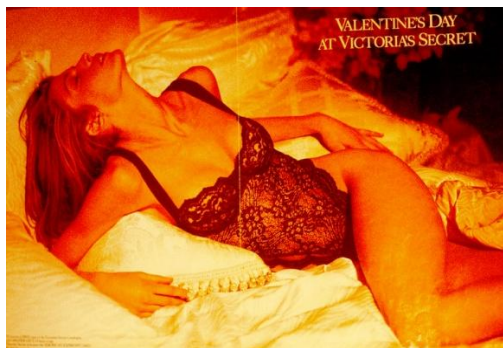


b) Neck and chest

In sexist ads, a woman’s neck is often shown with the throat thrust forward and the head inclined. Once again, this projects the image of women as vulnerable creatures.

As for the chest, which is actually the extension of the neck, it is often exposed, thrust forward, highlighted. To achieve this effect, women are shown with an arched back, arms up to the face or even behind their back, emphasizing their breasts.

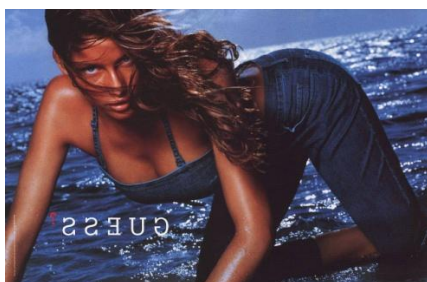
This type of position can evoke sensuality, fragility and even sexual availability.



c) Face (hair, expression and mouth)

The face and hair are key components in sexist ads.

The hair is always (or almost always!) long and windblown, suggesting the woman's sensuality. Hair is often coloured or very thick, and it does not have a natural appearance. What's more, women are sometimes shown with dishevelled hair, evoking characteristics of animals (for example, a hairdo that resembles a bird's plumage or the form of a snake).



If we study the face in particular, we can discover several components related to sexism. In general, women's faces have had make-up applied and have been retouched; the skin shows no pores and looks plastic. A perfect face is obligatory: no defect is acceptable.

Facial expressions are often fleeting. The eyes look into the distance; they are lowered or closed. In addition, the eyes can be veiled, hidden or dissimulated behind sunglasses. Often, women shown in sexist ads do not look directly into the camera. This emphasizes some of the stereotypes applied to women: passivity, innocence, fragility, hypocrisy, etc. Also, the facial expressions convey emotions typically associated with women, such as fear or sadness. Facial expressions can also be very seductive, emphasizing women's sexual availability.

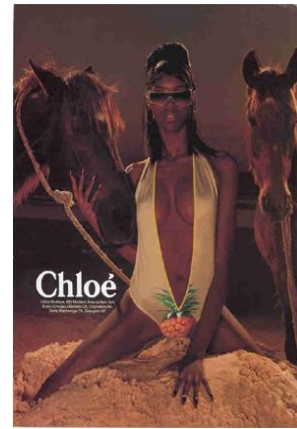
The mouth is often partially open and the lips are full. Women can also be seen with a false smile which is unrealistic, forced and exaggerated. Very often, the woman's fingers are near her mouth, also a sign of sexual availability.



Plastic skin



Veiled, far-away expression



Hidden expression

Seductive expression,
mouth partly open,
swollen lips

Exaggerated smile



Tongue visible

Women vs. men

Undeniably, differences exist between portrayals of men and women in advertising. As these photos demonstrate, women are often scantily clad or nude, while men are covered from head to toe. In addition, women adopt sexy, seductive positions while men are shown in relaxed, laid-back positions. As well, all the characteristics of sexism as described up to now with regard to women are present (body, environment, clothing, activities).



Messages

Following the description of the codes or criteria that can be identified in sexist advertising, we can discover three main messages regarding women:

1. Women can always be improved

The first message is that women must constantly work to become more beautiful, according to an unreal model which is inaccessible and toned. In fact, women must be tall, slim; they must be white, tanned, preferably blonde and youthful.

To achieve these standards, photos of models used in ads are retouched; this does not represent reality.

This general trend of aiming for perfection is, in some way, a sort of incitement to excessive thinness, cosmetic surgery and can even lead to skin bleaching (to conform to the Caucasian standard).

2. Women are encouraged to become sexual bombshells

Women are also portrayed as sexual objects, since many positions they adopt are like those shown in pornography. For example, ads show women in bikinis with voluptuous chests, nude, masturbating, behaving in a sexual manner with each other and achieving orgasm – all activities or references that are related to porno. One can even see the hypersexualization of young girls in ads.

3. Women are undervalued

Women are often devalued and debased in ads. They are shown as fragile, weak, dependent, mindless, infantilized, animalized, etc. They are simply perceived as objects. Violence against women is also pervasive in sexist advertising: women can be chopped up, locked up, tied up, assaulted (physically, sexually, verbally), raped and even killed.

Women are, in fact, shown as having no value whatsoever; this inevitably damages female self-esteem.

Consequences affecting equality between men and women

While equality between men and women is not the only value damaged by sexist advertising, we must pay special attention to this element because equality is a cornerstone of Western society.

Advertising messages tell women that they can be improved: i.e. that they must constantly strive to improve their bodies so as to comply with standards of beauty; that their only power is in seduction or sexuality; that they have no other value in and of themselves ; they are trapped by advertising messages. For their part, men learn that they are naturally handsome and all-powerful, and that women exist to please them. These messages reinforce the sexual stereotypes conveyed by our patriarchal society.

These inequalities lead to asymmetrical power relationships between men and women, which can give rise to violence against women, especially if someone is likely to hold the values conveyed through advertising images.

What can we do about it ?

- 1) Become aware of the phenomenon; that is the first step toward taking concrete action.**
- 2) Make friends and families aware by using the workshop “Decoding Images.”**
- 3) Use your judgment when buying: for example, don’t buy the products of companies that exploit women’s bodies in their ad campaigns.**
- 4) Complain in writing or by telephone when you are shocked by one or more ads. This is the best way to fight against sexist advertising. To this end, the Women’s Y has produced a document that will guide you in writing a complaint by supplying all the necessary resources, even form letters.**
- 5) Support organizations such as La Meute-MédiAction or the National Coalition Against Sexist Advertising.**

Summary

Codes/Criteria	Key Words
ENVIRONMENT	Interior, unfocused or undefined place, exotic or unreal locale.
ACTIVITIES	Passive, unnatural positions, seductive poses, ridiculous, stereotypical activities, hysterical, mindless appearance.
CLOTHING	Nude or semi-nude, seductive clothing which is undone, wet, diaphanous, flimsy, red (evoking passion, love), plunging neckline.
BODY	<p>Position : Standing, one knee bent, high heels, uncomfortable contortions, legs spread, focus on crotch or buttocks, kneeling, on all fours, lying down, view of back only.</p> <p>Neck : Throat forward, head inclined.</p> <p>Chest : Chest exposed, back arched, arms raised or behind the body, focus on breasts.</p> <p>Hands : Artificial position, manicured, caressing or brushing against</p> <p>Hair : Windblown, coloured, too thick, dishevelled, animal-like characteristics.</p> <p>Face: Made up, retouched, veiled, without visible pores, plastic effect.</p> <p>Expression : Looking away, eyes lowered or closed, veiled expression or eyes hidden behind sunglasses, expression showing traditionally feminine emotions (fear, sadness, seduction).</p> <p>Mouth : Partly open, swollen lips, pouting, false smile, veneered, exaggerated, mouth veiled, fingers in the mouth (or hands close to mouth), tongue sticking out.</p> <p>Chopped up : The body of a women is chopped up so that only the “interesting” part is seen (sexual availability, violence)</p>

Resource Text 3

Excerpt from *Hypersexualization? Useful Guide to Information and Action* ¹³

HOW TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST A SEXIST AD, STEP BY STEP

Prepare a file

Obtain a copy of the ad in question. If the ad includes words or images – as in radio or TV ads – make note of them. Make note of the date the ad first appeared, the type of product it promotes and the media used.

Inform the company concerned

Send a letter to the management, customer relations department or communications department of the product manufacturer, asking them to stop the ad campaign. A letter can also be sent to the media or to the store using the ad. Above all, do not underestimate the impact of this type of action.

Inform the National Coalition against Sexist Advertising

Send a copy of the letter to the National Coalition against Sexist Advertising (CNCPS). Its mandate is to react rapidly and publicly to denounce sexist ads and to demand that they be withdrawn. Its site, <www.coalition-cncps.org> and <coalition-cncps.org/textes/Charte_CNCPS_ang.pdf> (English-language charter), contains a grid to analyze sexist ads, sample letters of denunciation, petitions, and press releases in its *Guide to denouncing manifestations of sexism*.

Submit a complaint to Advertising Standards Canada, an independent advertising self-regulatory body with a mandate to follow up on complaints submitted by the general public. Complaints can be submitted by email, <adstandards.com/en>, by mail (2015 rue Peel, Montréal, suite 915, Quebec H3A 1T8) or by fax.*

Invite other agencies and individuals to submit complaints. Strength in numbers can make all the difference!

Gather support

If the complaints do not bring about the desired results, you can circulate a petition in your area. The petition ought to describe the problem created by the ad and ask for its withdrawal. Each signatory must write his or her full name and the name of the municipality. To see a sample petition, consult the *Guide to denouncing manifestations of sexism*. It could also be useful to ask for help in writing the petition by contacting a local agency such as a sexual assault centre (CALAC) or a women's centre.

¹³ CALACS de Rimouski (2009). *Hypersexualization? Guide pratique d'information et d'action*, p. 55-57, 59 and 61.

Leave the petition in several different places to gather the maximum number of signatures of support. If the petition is widely circulated, don't forget to include a deadline for signature collection and a postal address to guarantee that it will be returned once it is completed.

Once the deadline for signatures has passed, send the original, including all the signatures, to the company concerned. Keep a copy.

Publicize your request

Giving public exposure to your request gives it much more impact. This procedure involves sending a letter to the editor to the print media, which could then publish the letter. You can also send an email to the newspapers, radio and television stations, informing them of your request to have a certain ad withdrawn, your actions to date, as well as the number of signatures you have gathered, if you have opted for a petition. You can find a sample press release in the *Guide to denouncing manifestations of sexism*.

These approaches can be very effective and can result in the targeted ad either being removed or not being renewed in the future. It's important to make the public aware of any success you achieve, because it will show people that mobilizing can bring about change in our society. Moreover, this will send a message to the advertising companies and to businesses that sexist ads are not acceptable.

ADDITIONAL STEPS TO TAKE FOR CERTAIN ADS

Ads for and promotion of alcoholic beverages

Submit a complaint to the *Conseil d'éthique de l'industrie québécoise des boissons alcooliques* (Ethics Council of the Alcoholic Beverage Industry in Quebec) via its website. This takes only a few minutes: <educalcool.qc.ca/> links you to <conseilethique.qc.ca/en/>.

<www.educalcool.qc.ca/ethique>.

Telephone: 1-888-ALCOOL1

The Ethics Council pronounces quickly and informs complainants and the company concerned. While it has no power to withdraw an ad, its judgments can quickly act as a deterrent.

Radio and TV ads

For ads broadcast by a Canadian station, you can also contact the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) by filling in a complaint form available on its website <www.cbsc.ca>.

Telephone: 1-866-696-4718

Ads in Quebec targeting children under 13

Articles 248 and 249 of the Consumer Protection Act (*Loi sur la protection du consommateur*) prohibit televised commercial advertising that targets children under 13. The Office de la protection du Consommateur (OPC) enforces the application of this law.

Contact the regional offices of the Office de la protection du consommateur and ask how to proceed with a complaint. <opc.gouv.qc.ca>. For English-language version link to <opc.gouv.qc.ca/Webforms/PlanDuSite_En.aspx>
Telephone: 1-888-672-2556

Print ad or billboard

Contact the municipal administration to inform them of your disagreement concerning the ad or billboard and the steps you have already taken with regard to the company concerned. Ask the municipal administration to do a follow-up by contacting the company which is using the ad, the owners of the land where the ad is located or by adopting municipal by-laws against this type of ad.

Sexist Product

Perhaps the product being promoted is sexist or promotes hypersexualization. This is the case for dolls or clothing being sold to children on a shampoo label promising “to reveal the sexy kitten in all of us.” To intervene in this type of situation, consult the relevant courses of action suggested in this section, by omitting the steps for ads.

Magazine, journal and newspaper contents

Consult courses of action suggested in this section.

For newspapers, submit a written complaint to the newspaper concerned, to the company that owns it and send a copy to the following press councils:

Conseil de presse du Québec

Telephone: 1-514-529-2818

Website: <www.conseildepresse.qc.ca>.

English-language version <conseildepresse.qc.ca/index.php?&lang=en>

Canadian Newspaper Association (CNA)

Telephone: 1-416-923-3567

Website: <www.cna.acj.ca>

Film and video content

To lodge a complaint regarding film or video content, consult the relevant courses of action suggested in this section.

To ask for a change in the classification of a film aired in theatres or for rent in a video club, consult the Régie du cinéma, the Quebec film classification agency. Contact information is available on its website under the section *Pour nous joindre*.

Website: <www.rcq.qc.ca>

Telephone: 1-800-463-2463

For more information, you can also consult the Media Awareness Network for a wealth of information about media in general.

Website:<www.media-awareness.ca>

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