

LS 420 SENIOR SEMINOR

# Sex in Fashion Ads

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The fashion industry has seen its fair share of controversies over the past two decades. Models were considered too thin for runways. Then there was the graphic design phenomenon of Photoshop that is used in just about every fashion photograph to make models skinner, more perfect or in cases of beauty shots, to enhance the product's capabilities digitally. One issue that has seemed to sneak up on consumers is the sexual content in fashion ads. Sexy fashion ads aren't anything new. In fact sexy advertisements in general have been around in America, as early as 1908 with Coca-Cola's Gibson Girl pictorial. Over the years, ads have become increasingly explicit, each ad more shocking than the last.

Opening up a fashion magazine may seem harmless. But that is not always the case. The fashion industry features more nudity than ever before, which may seem contradicting. Some ads dabble in homoeroticism, BDSM and pedophilia when a young model who is actually of age but looks a lot younger. Is it all art or is it just plain pornographic? Carmine Sarracino and Kevin Scott, authors of *The Porning of America* believe that the American culture is being dominantly influenced by porn. Complaints on ads have been a worldwide occurrence with some ads being banned in one to several countries. Despite groups launching complaints and boycotts, the fashion industry overall has managed to be unscathed. Designers still have creative control to use sexiness in their campaigns and magazines are still eager to publish every piece.

*Harper's Bazaar* was the first official fashion magazine in 1867 in the United States. *Vogue* sent out their first issue in 1892. Both magazines are considered Fashion Bibles to the industry today. Even though these magazines had their start in the United

States, the first depiction of fashion took place in Italy. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the common attire consisted of robes. Before then, depending on the geographical location, animal furs and skins were used to cover and protect the body. However, soon advancements were made in tailoring. The button was developed, causing a change in garments and how people wore them. The invention of the button opened up options for the way people dressed. Buttons allowed people to take their wardrobe to another level and creative minds could create one of a kind looks.

It's hard to say exactly when fashion became fashion because clothing wasn't used to make statements like they are today. Throughout history, clothing had been depicted in art pieces but was not the focus of the rendering. It is also hard to pinpoint the first fashion designer. Scholars believe the first fashion designer originated from Italy. Antonio Pisanello designed costumes and fabrics during this time and worked in several media; such as painting, textiles and portraits. He worked with King Alfonso of Naples where he "not only designed sets, banners, triumphal arches and other decorations but also costumes. His studies show exceptional knowledge of the 3-dimensional nature of costume and an [imaginative] rendering of the tactile qualities of fabrics and their ornamentation, especially of embroidery and fur" (Mackrell 10). At this point, people developed interest in other peoples and other nations. The "new manifestations in fashion ran parallel with humanism, literally, a devotion to human interests, the concern with the individual man being a main preoccupation and the Renaissance, which awakened the same attitudes" (Mackrell 8). "Foreign dress was often described in the work of chronicles and diarist" (Mackrell 10). As curiosity grew among the countries, artists who were eager to know about fashions and customs often traveled and recorded their

impressions of what they saw by making woodcuts (Mackrell 10). Woodcuts were a printing technique that required a person to carve into a block of wood, creating an image which can then be covered with ink for printing. “Between 1520 and 1610 more than 200 collections of engravings, etchings or woodcuts were published containing plates of figures wearing clothes peculiar to their nationality and rank” (Blackman 6). In the late 15th century, Albrecht Dürer was “a master of the woodcut”. Dürer experimented with etching, which was a new technique that was developed in Germany. “Perhaps the most salient aspect of Dürer’s work for fashion and its illustration is his rendering of both the front and the back view of the fashionable lady’s dress” (Mackrell 13).

“For centuries, artist had of course depicted clothes, but these early woodcuts were the 1st dedicated illustrations of dress and, as such, became the prototype for fashion illustration as we know it today” (Blackman 6). Fashion drawing slowly developed as advancements grew during the Renaissance period. People became wealthier and wardrobes for men and women expanded. Clothing was able to depict a person’s status, job or rank. Royal family members or grand ladies often worked with tailors and mercers. “An ambassador or traveler would tell her the fashion developments in other courts and societies and then she would discuss her ideas with her tailor” (qtd. in *Drawing Fashion* 10). Sketches were rare except for the rough sketches the tailors made or the tailor’s technical plans. If you were not rich and wanted to be fashionable you had to discover ways to follow the trends. McDowell explains that individuals “looked for sources of information that were cheap and reliably up to date. And they found them in drawings done at the court to illustrate the latest styles being worn by the grand and famous. Sold comparatively cheaply, and as times moved forward even hand-colored,

these drawings told a woman what she needed to know in order to keep up with the ton at her own level” (qtd. in *Drawing Fashion*10). These early drawings were not artful. “They did not set out to seduce the viewer into a world of wealth, power and... glamour” (qtd. in *Drawing Fashion*10).

During the 18th and 19th centuries fashion illustration expanded from its technical original purpose into a legitimate art form. It was in Germany where the first ever fashion magazine made its debut. Germany was one of the main centers of publishing. During that time the fashion magazine *Journal der Luxus und der Moden* (1786-1826) became very popular. France may be a fashion capitol now but in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, France was involved with the Revolution and was not publishing any kind of literature. England published notable journals like *Gallery of Fashion* (1794) and *Ackermann’s Repository of the Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufacturing, Fashion and Politics* (1809-28). Soon after, “France was once again established as the centre of the fashionable world, and set the standard for fashion illustration, notably in the work of the talented Colin family in publications such as *Le Follet* (1829), *Le Journal des demoiselles* (1833) and *La Mode illustrée* (1860)”(Blackman 6-7). These early magazines featured mainly drawings and an abundance words.

Fashion was changing drastically after the French Revolution into a simpler style of dress. Social attitudes were changing also; the people were willing to splurge on their style of dress, which only accelerated the fashion industry. The industry was predominately run by men. Fashion illustration was important to both men and women during the 19th century. “A lady and her escort, a gentleman with his paramour became a standard form of fashion vignette printed and bound with increasing sophistication in the

burgeoning fashion magazines read by women of even middleclass” (Drawing Fashion 12). This can be seen in the fashion plate, ‘Costume anglais’, 1814 by Horace Vernet (Mackrell 122). It is a depiction of how the French viewed the English’s style of dress with all its frills. It was not until the 1830s that fashion plates were dated and signed by the artist. France was leading the fashion industry and was exporting their magazines and fashion plates to eager countries like England who depended on their weekly productions. Fashions flourished and magazines remained popular. Illustrators had their works published for the world to see. “In a sense, by the end of the 19th century every commercial artist was a fashion artist” (Drawing Fashion 12).

In the 20th century, photography was an invention that changed the fashion industry all together. Photography was considered to have been:

“generally held responsible for the demise of illustration by the second World War, yet it too was influenced by fashion illustration, as is demonstrated in early examples by the stiff poses against studio prop background that mimic those in contemporary [fashion] plates” (Blackman 7).

Many designers wanted their fashions photographed. It is much easier to photograph a garment versus drawing it out. Illustrators cannot really compete with a camera in that aspect. Colored photographs were printed on expensive glossy paper and featured for the first time haute couture.

“The beau monde could see the latest fashions through a camera’s lens which picked up every flowing flounce, layers of ruching, yards of lace, lavish beadwork and embroidery on the luxurious materials that made up the ostentatious dresses

of the Belle Époque when the Art Nouveau style was at its zenith” (Mackrell 152).

Fashion illustration formed its own lane in the industry. “Modern fashion as a legitimate art form in its own right was the product pre-eminently of Paris which, before World War I, shared with Berlin the honour of being the home of European costume- and, it must be admitted, led the field with total conviction” (Drawing Fashion 12).

America finally stepped into the fashion industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue* had an impact on the world. *Vogue* early in its publication displayed predominately illustrations for their covers. Even with the cameras available *Vogue* still featured many illustrations throughout their pages. As time progressed and interests changed, *Vogue* slowly transitioned with the times as many other magazines did and featured fewer and fewer illustrations. Fashion photography and illustration are two art forms that sometimes melt together to create what soon developed and was an advertisement or “ad.” People used magazines to see what everyone was wearing in different cultures so they knew what to emulate. Thus, magazines were a source of basic information to its readers. Fashion seekers would find out what was popular and sew up replicas. If you were an individual wealthy enough, he or she could order the featured product or materials.

The fashion industry is very unique. Fashion is never constant and is ever changing and reinventing itself. “Fashion is so universal that it affects everyone regardless of heredity, class or income. It has a long history –from the cave dwellers innovative use of animal skins to the mass marketing that now brings designer and states labels to everyone” (Winters and Goodman 3). Advertising is a concept that started long

ago and can be dated back to ancient Egypt “where merchants chiseled sales messages into stone tablets and placed them along public roads” (Diamond and Diamond 6). The fashion industry did not begin to use advertising until the late 1800s.

“In 1880, John Wanamaker, the Philadelphia dry goods merchant, was the first major retailer to use the newspaper to deliver daily messages about his store and its merchandise to the people. The ads were fashioned in story form, with each day’s installment concentrating on a different store activity or event. Neiman-Marcus followed the Wanamaker format, with drawings as enhancements” (Diamond and Diamond 6).

Retail advertising was the first of its kind and really began the communication between stores, designers and consumers.

“Today, fashion advertisers regularly communicate with their audiences through a variety of means that run the gamut from the one-shot ad to total campaigns. The advertising programs range from the simplest to the most sophisticated, each hoping to increase customer awareness and sales volume” (Diamond and Diamond 6). There are four types of advertising in the fashion industry, brand advertising, retail advertising, trade advertising and institutional advertising. Brand advertising is what designer use to promote their specific label. Retail advertising is used to get consumers into the store. A flyer promoting a sale at Macy’s is a great example of retail advertising. Trade advertising is used within the industry between businesses offering each other service. Cotton manufactures may promote to a specific designer for use of their particular cotton. Institutional advertising is when a company promotes something other than their products or services. For instance, American Apparel used some of their ads to promote equal



rights for the LGBT community and even developed a line of t-shirts reading “legalize gay.” All four types of advertising require the participation of advertisers, who will reach the consumer, the advertising agency, who works with the advertiser to get them the materials needed and finally, the media, who is considered as the “communication channel” that the advertisers use, like a fashion magazine. The kind of ads that you would find in Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar and W magazine are mainly brand advertisements. You will see popular brands like Versace or Dior having a fashion spread featuring their latest ad campaign.

Fashion has come a long way. We all take part in fashion when we get dressed every day. Even the most unfashionable person can somehow make a fashion statement.

“Fashion is that fleeting, ever-changing phenomenon that promises to sell moods as well as merchandise. How to present a fashion; develop a demand for it, and sell it are professional processes. The uninitiated amateur can be overwhelmed by the professional whose knowledge and techniques are employed in the effective promotion of different kinds of products. Fashion is excitement we are seeing more and more of it in the images created by current fashion advertising, visual merchandising and promotional activities. Fashion is a fantasy, role playing and an expression of one’s concept of self or ‘inner concept’. Clothing can be used to command attention and secure admiration from our peers” (Winters 6).

The mechanics of fashion are not as easy as some may think. It takes an abundance of planning and a great deal of creativity. Advertising is especially difficult because you have to appeal to your followers and still be able to bring potential enthusiasts.

“The goal of fashion advertising and promotion is to bring prominence to a particular company, and to increase its chances for profit. To achieve this goal, it requires the participation of a wealth of professionals that include copywriters, artists, photographers, layout designers, visual merchandisers, fashion show directors, and managerial executives, as well as budgets that allow them to translate their thoughts into distinguished presentations” (Diamond and Diamond 4).

Because fashion is unique, its advertising has to be just as unique. If done correctly, “the power of advertising is such that it can quickly and succinctly deliver messages to specifically target groups anywhere in the world” (Diamond and Diamond 5). The delivering these fashion messages will not only increase profit but enhance brand awareness. Consumers can benefit from these ads as well “by learning about what is available to them, where purchases may be made, which companies offer the best prices, and, in general, how to become more informed shoppers” (Diamond and Diamond 5). Imagine a typical Calvin Klein jean ad with the backdrop of an urban empty basketball court with a group of young people wearing the denim. The guy is probably shirtless while the girl also sports a small leather jacket in a flirty pose. There are more than just jeans in this scenario. There’s a mood and a style. The ad displays clues about the wearer’s lifestyle and how the customer perceives his or her own self. Your fashion can be a reflection of you. You want to portray a particular lifestyle by making certain fashion choices. Fashion ads can guide consumers.

Who dictates the trends of fashion? There were times in history when women were told what to wear or how to dress and what was deemed acceptable. As women’s

roles progressed, so did what they wore. The women's revolution initiated the movement of women being able to think for themselves and thus make their own decisions. Women were now deciding what to wear and fashion changed. Magazines helped guide women in finding out what was the next big trend. "In the late 50's and early 60's, one of the fashion voices was Diana Vreeland, who was chief editor of *Vogue* said things like, 'navy blue is the new black' and just like that, there were little basic blue dresses where there had been basic black" (Winters and Goodman 14). As women became more liberated, the "dictatorial voice" subsided in the fashion industry.

"The production-oriented manufacturer had to develop marketing-orientation, which meant doing the marketing research to determine what customers want and will accept. Women were not going to automatically adopt the new look ... just because the fashion magazines and newspapers and stores said it was the greatest thing that ever happened. Women have really started dressing according to their own dictates and making fashion decisions for themselves" (Winters and Goodman 15).

The roles reversed in advertising, changing how consumers used it and how advertisers marketed.

In recent years fashion advertising has been under fire multiple for situations. Advertising has been accused of

"manipulation, fraud, inanity, greed or just plain bad taste. Other critics claim that advertising is 'sneaky' and that it contains 'hidden persuasion' or 'subliminal seduction' designed to influence people to buy things they do not need or want... and create needs in people that weren't there before" (Winters and Goodman 153).

Creating ads for merchandise that people don't really want is foolish and costly. No advertising company or fashion label would take such a financial risk. In fashion advertising, labels have to look at their target market and analyze their wants and needs. Fashion designers already have a clue of what will trend by forecasting. Forecasting is a huge part of fashion design because it can make or break your company if you make bad forecasting decisions, which can waste millions of dollars. A good designer will be designing a season or two ahead of release. "People either accept what the designer's decree or they veto proposed styles. What is accepted becomes fashion" (Winters and Goodman 5). "By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expanding consumerism and the 1960s-style pursuit of personal fulfillment were inseparable. Manufacturers spent a great deal of money on image building for cosmetics, perfumes, and fashions to evoke confidence in their brands. Advertisers no longer described how their products worked; customers were left to fill in the reasons for the purchase based on their feeling about the product line, its image and the attractiveness of the models showing it" (Sivulka 318).

When it comes to children, advertising has a different effect. When I say children I'm referring to adolescents that are commonly referred to as tweens and teens, ten to nineteen years old. As children become older and become aware of their surroundings like fashion, they too become more interested in making their own decisions regarding it. *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* aren't magazines that have age restrictions but are designed for young adults all the way to women in their sixties. Regardless, children are able to access magazines more likely to look at the magazines for fashion influences to make their decisions. Because they are younger, they are not quite sure what is acceptable or cool.

Fashion ads appeal to that market because they can easily get a visual depiction of what is perceived as popular. Also:

“Advertising constructs images of femininity and ideal female beauty and establishes definitions that employ particular codes that help viewers read and understand what being a woman means. This is accomplished in ways that make complete sense, that appear normal and natural. So called feminine qualities such as softness, beauty, perfection, health and sexiness are tied to the consumption of products designed to achieve these same ends” (Merskin 204).

While fashion ads are creating visual fantasies for their older target consumer, children are being drawn in and subsequently being influenced. High fashion ads tend to feature more adult subjects that some children should not be exposed to. The sexual content might not be something a child should be learning from or taking cues from. Sexy ads are not a new subject in America because we really pioneered it in our culture. “of course sex has always been used in American advertising, but in the past few decades the sex in such advertising increasingly derived from hard-core porn” (Sarracino and Scott 119).

There has saying has always been that “sex sells.” The “sex sells” concept is a concept that is worldly understood. In the United States, sex tends to be a taboo topic compared to other countries with less conservative views. Regardless of America’s old fashion views, Europe has made twice as many headlines for banning ads. Americans cannot have an issue with the fact of “sex sells” entirely because it still works; otherwise it would not still be an advertising strategy. “In the 1980s, ads for fragrances to blue jeans featured provocative images to create a brand image and solicit a response. Common themes suggested that if you buy this product, you’ll be more sexually attractive, have

more or better sex, or just feel sexier” (Sivulka 317). The problem commonly debated is when ads use excessive sex and when sex is used to sell to a possible minor. Times have changed drastically in the world of fashion as far as showing skin. There was a time when the hem line slightly above the knee was risqué. Now it is possible to see a completely naked person in a fashion ad without being immediately shocked. Society has progressively become accustomed to these racy images without even knowing it. But every now and then, the fashion industry will create some images that are still able to shock consumers and cause controversy. Some of the frequent offenders of the shock value are Abercrombie & Fitch, American Apparel, and Tom Ford.

Abercrombie & Fitch is a huge conglomerate with Hollister, Abercrombie Kids, and Gilly Hicks under its label. Abercrombie is very popular brand in America and is definitely a lifestyle brand. Abercrombie was founded in 1892 and sold sporting goods. In the 70s the company went bankrupt in New York. Eventually the name found its way into retail when The Limited agreed to buy the Abercrombie & Fitch division of Oshman's for \$47 million in cash in 1988. The Limited had big plans for the newly acquired stores.

“The Limited planned to spend a year studying the new business before making any substantive changes, Alfred Dietzel, the company's vice president for public relations, said that 'we'll be out of the gun business pretty quick.' But he added that gun volume was 'only an infinitesimal' portion of sales. Particular attention will also be given to studying whether other sports equipment, such as exercise machines, should be retained, he said” (Abercrombie Chain Bought n.p.)

Founders, David Abercrombie and Ezra Fitch, probably never imagined that their names would be a part of numerous controversial ads involving sex.

When a shopper enters an Abercrombie or Hollister store, he or she is immediately greeted by an extremely large picture of an attractive, barely clothed male model. Secondly, the music inside the store is loud and the place is heavily scented with the company's colognes and perfumes. The staff members are referred to as "models" and their interview processes are called "castings." An individual cannot escape Abercrombie's presence and the immediate truth of "sex sells." Their website also uses sex to sell. The brand offers a variety of expensive casual sportswear. And interesting enough Abercrombie describes its brand as:

"rooted in East Coast traditions and Ivy League heritage, Abercrombie & Fitch is the essence of privilege and casual luxury. The Adirondacks supply a clean inspiration to this preppy, youthful All-American lifestyle. A combination of classic and sexy creates a charged atmosphere that is confident and just a bit provocative. Idolized and respected, Abercrombie & Fitch is timeless and always cool."

Abercrombie words their sex appeal mildly. They have had numerous complaints about their billboards and ads, not only in the United States but internationally. Abercrombie published a catalog called *A&F Quarterly* from 1997 to 2003 that sold for six dollars to eighteen and over customers. Abercrombie sparked much controversy because just like their racy ads, the catalog featured images many bloggers and reporters described as "soft-core porn" or "homoerotic." Just like a pornographic magazine, the catalog was displayed in packaging to ward off underage buyers. Four years ago in 2008,

Abercrombie announced that they would be releasing an “adults-only” catalog featuring nudity available for Europe only.

Two of the three Executive Vice Presidents of Abercrombie are female. At first that might come as a shock but their advertising gives you clues. Figure 1 was an advertisement used for a store that was slated to open in Singapore in 2011. The image of this young boy’s body is undoubtedly the focus of the ad. His face is cut off; there is no emotion to be seen. The ad was cited for the jeans being too low and was banned from Singapore. But to whom was this ad supposed to appeal? Women and homosexual men. With this ad Abercrombie left out an entire range of people. In most Abercrombie ads, you will find a trend that is almost subliminal. They are trying to reach the young female population. The woman is in control, usually on top of the guy in the image. You will find images that at first glance look as if he is stealing a kiss from her when it is her sex appeal to lure him in so he could kiss her. Or the images of are two girls and one guy being playfully pushed around, not for his pleasure or his fantasy but for hers.

Abercrombie has had its successes and its failures. When their ads became too provocative, there was a substantial effect financially. In the past few years, Abercrombie has not been as profitable as they formerly were. Maybe their advertising messages are becoming lost within the brand? Perhaps parents are finally using their buying power to express disapproval. Margaret Bogenrief of the Wall Street Journal believes that the concept “sex sells” is a retail myth and appropriately titled her article stating so, “Sex Sells, and Other Retail Myths.” She also names Abercrombie as one of the top five retail losers for 2012 (Bogenrief [n.p.]). Needless to say, Abercrombie declined her request for comment. But this isn’t the first article about Abercrombie’s declining trend. Sapna



Maheshwari of *Bloomberg Business Week* opens up her article by saying that Abercrombie's "signature models may soon be looking for work elsewhere" (Maheshwari [n.p]).

"Abercrombie & Fitch's skin-filled ads and nightclub vibe once delighted American teenagers and infuriated parents. Today, many aren't even paying attention. The once-edgy retailer has lost a third of its market value in the past year as it grapples with falling sales in Europe and the U.S. While Abercrombie blames the economy for its woes, brand consultants say it also has failed to change with the times. Today's teens are underwhelmed by the half-naked models and blaring, dimly lit stores" (Maheshwari [n.p.]).

Abercrombie's racy image worked from 1995-2008. It seems as if teens are now bored with their sex-appeal. Because Abercrombie's target markets, teens, are so technologically advance, they are able to stay extremely current and connected. If they feel as if they have "been-there, done-that" with the brand, then it might be time to change their risqué, shock value tact. You can shock someone once and maybe even twice, but eventually it gets old if you are using the same or similar images. Additionally, parents are becoming more tech savvy. They can see the ads and there are enough outraged parents that are not ready to give a hundred dollars for a garment for an overly sexy brand for their children. "Retailer Abercrombie & Fitch, whose scantily clad models don't draw teens like they used to, [and] will close 180 stores through 2015" (Maheshwari [n.p.]).

One popular retailer who does not express any shame in their hyper-sexualized ads is American Apparel. American Apparel has been in several magazines throughout

the years. AA prides itself as a “downtown Los Angeles, fully integrated company who manufactures in the USA” (Charney [n.p.]). AA was fortunate with manufacturing in the USA, because Americans have been making it clear that they do not want merchandise from out-sourced manufacturing companies and to bring jobs back into the U.S. Dov Charney started AA in 1997 by manufacturing basic t-shirts when he moved to Los Angeles from South Carolina. Although he is Canadian, he fell in love with Americanism. AA’s website states that they

“currently employ approximately 10,000 people globally (about 5,000 in LA), and operate more than 285 retail stores in 20 countries. Within our business model, knitting, dyeing, cutting, sewing, photography, marketing, distribution and design all happen in the company's facilities in Los Angeles. The company operates the largest garment factory in the United States, at a time when most apparel production has moved offshore. With [their] recently opened stores in China, [they] are now selling Made in USA clothing in the largest consumer market in the world. American Apparel leverages art, design and technology to advance the business process, while continuing to pioneer industry standards of social and environmental responsibility in the workplace”

(Charney [n.p.]). Dov is completely invested and involved in his business too. While most business owners sit at the top of their company and are rarely involved with the mechanics, Dov is the complete opposite. Dov likes to be a part of all the processes. He is more than a creative director, photographer, activist, and businessman. In an interview posted on his website, Dov explains how he even stepped into more of a model role:

“I am an intuitive designer. I put it on and I see if it's tight or not. I love the touch of fabric. I've seen photographs of Yves Saint Laurent in a fitting and I thought, "That's how we do it!" I try on all my underwear designs before they go into production.”

AA started off as just an American made t-shirt company but since then has expanded into a very successful retail company offering basic knitwear for children as well as adults. AA mainly targets urban young adults in their twenties or as they call them today, “hipsters.” In a *New York Times* article Dov was interviewed and described his consumer as a new generation of adults.

“They want what their parents wanted at that age, what kids always want: to have a beer, to smoke a joint, to go to a good movie, to party... 'Kids today mimic their parents at the same age, not just in looks and style, but in values,[and] they want to learn something, they want to be happy. At the same time it doesn't feel good when their happiness is based on exploitation” (qtd. by La Ferla[n.p.]).

AA does not splash their name all over its clothing like many other retailers, e.g. Abercrombie & Fitch. AA’s clothing is like walking into a Pantone color wheel of cotton knitwear.

AA is not best known for their comfortable t-shirts but for their advertising, which is led by Dov himself. On the AA website there is a section specifically for their advertising along with an extensive archive of photographs. Dov has an un-airbrushed ethic when it comes to his photography for his ads. None of the models used in their advertising is a professional model. According to their website they find their “models all over the world, through online submissions, word of mouth, and in retail stores, where

they have been known to do an impromptu test shoot or two” (Charney [n.p.]). Their ads “have always been indicative of a time and place in American Apparel's identity, which has evolved into a 12,000 employee worldwide collaboration.” Dov likes to find non-professional models because he wants to have models that his customers can relate to. He wants the people in his ads seem real. While that response may seem understandable, Dov has had pornstars pose in a few of his ads.

It is almost impossible to miss an American Apparel ad or billboard. Although there are only a few of his ads that are not newsworthy or shocking, about 75% of his ads feature some sort of nudity. A play on words, AA has an ad with a girl modeling a bodysuit by lying down, with her legs wide open with the words “Now Open” at the top of the page, which of course refers to the new locations. Dov is clever because he uses a great deal of white space in his ads so that your eye is drawn directly to his provocative images. AA also has an ad highlighting their socks featuring a completely nude woman, wearing the socks of course. But there is a second image beside it of that same woman's bare breast, all within the same ad. The images seem completely unrelated and yet they are both used simultaneously. Controversy never seems to leave AA alone. There have been numerous complaints stating that the ads are “exploiting women,” “sexualizing under aged girls” or just “vulgar” just to name a few (qtd. by Nelson).

Dov has been interviewed abundantly in regards to his ads, and he has stood by his images. Dove claims that his advertising techniques are his way of recognizing “contemporary adult and sexual freedom” (qtd by Friedman). While many designers refuse to comment about situations where they are put under fire negatively, Dov admits his images are sexual. Dov says “sexual freedom, art and photography are important to

me” (Charney [n.p.]). He stands by his beliefs in sexual freedom so much so that he has *BUTT* magazine in some of his stores. *BUTT* is a homosexual magazine which features nudity. Dov felt very strongly about his choice to promote the magazine that he even posted a letter to the public explaining his decision. Dov believes that “to make progress, you end up offending people. And people were offended by many things I have done over the years. But I did what I felt was right, especially from an art and creative point of view” (Charney [n.p.]). The only time Dov pulled an ad before it ever hit the press was after 9/11. His reasoning was that the images would be inappropriate and insensitive. In an ABC News article Emily Friedman ponders the question of what if he wasn’t successful with his tactics. “While Charney may interpret his ads and billboards as smart marketing techniques, some say the images border on pedophilia and others even threaten to boycott the store altogether” (Friedman [n.p.]). “The company has kind of built this reputation for advertising images using girls who look really young and are posing erotically...People are increasingly becoming outraged at the imagery” said blogger Leslie Price, the editor of Racked.com (qtd. by Friedman). AA’s ads definitely resonate with customers. There is no denying that AA skates on the fine line between advertising and being plain pornographic. “When you see Calvin Klein and Dolce and Gabbana ads, it’s kind of a fantasy. But when you look at the American Apparel ads, it seems more realistic because they’re using non-models and they might not airbrush all their faults” said Price (qtd. by Friedman). Figure 2 is a current ad being ran on American Apparel’s website as well as a print ad. Most people will look at these two photographs and only notice that she is topless modeling pants. The erotic tone is prevalent which is probably why Dov ultimately choose this particular image versus the other pictures from the shoot.

Without looking at the image with a narrow outlook, you can find the beauty within it. She is a very beautiful girl with an ethnic background which isn't noticeably specific which means people of many different races can relate to her. She has a face of pleasure as she swings her hair back. The pleasure is not necessarily a sexual pleasure but a freedom, relaxed state of euphoric bliss. It looks as if it is an Indian summer as the sun shines down on her. This ad can appeal to both of AA's target market. It is appealing to women because we want to be as free as her. It appeals to men simply because they want to be with someone like her. An image like Figure 2 can be seen in an artful light instead of like smut.

Tom Ford on the other hand plays more with the fantasy aspect of advertising. Tom Ford enters fashion history books as one of the most successful, iconic designers of our time. Tom Ford's success was astounding yet unexpected because he had no experience in the fashion industry. Ford went to school at Parsons School of Design in New York and Paris to study architecture, concluding his training at Parsons in New York. Shortly after Ford found employment overseas in Italy with Gucci as the company's Womenswear Designer. According to Ford's website, two years later, in 1992 "he became Design Director and in 1994 he was appointed Creative Director of Gucci. He was responsible for the design of all product lines, from clothing to perfumes, and for the Group's corporate image, advertising campaigns and store design [n.p.]" Ford quickly moved up into his Gucci position and became a powerful force in the fashion industry.

When Ford began at Gucci, they were not doing financially well. Gucci was on the brink of bankruptcy. In a very short period of time, Tom Ford completely turned

things around for Gucci. Ford recognizes that during his “10 years as Creative Director at Gucci and Gucci Group, sales increased from 230 million dollars in 1994 to almost 3 billion dollars in 2003, making Gucci one of the largest and most profitable luxury brands in the world [n.p.].” In January 2000, Gucci Group obtained Yves Saint Laurent and YSL Beaute and Ford became their Creative Director as well. Eventually Tom Ford was made Vice Chairman of the Management Board of Gucci Group in 2002. Ford is a forced to be reckoned with. Sarah Mower writes of Ford in *Vogue* magazine,

“he was designing fifteen men’s and women’s Gucci and YSL collections a year, in addition to playing corporate titan who had reconfigured the fashion landscape at the turn of the millennium. He and [former Gucci Group CEO, Domenico] de Sole had gathered an extraordinary stable at high speed: buying YSL, persuading Nicolas Ghesquière to come on board with Balenciaga, seeking out Alexander McQueen, courting Stella McCartney, and having the foresight to understand how Bottega Veneta would sell[n.p.].”

Eventually Tom Ford stepped down from Gucci Group in 2004. In Mower’s interview, Tom confessed “I think that I had got so caught up in being successful and making money, and making sure the company made money, making sure each quarter our share price went up [n.p.].” Ford called himself a “racehorse” when he was at Gucci and YSL. But Ford did not give up on the fashion industry. A year later in 2005, Ford launched his very own Tom Ford Brand. The Tom Ford success did not end with Gucci either. The Tom Ford brand currently consists of womenswear, menswear, eyewear, a cosmetic collection and 49 stores worldwide. Of course Ford has won several prestigious awards from the Council of Fashion Designers of America.

Although Ford has seen much success, he has also seen his fair share of controversy for the sexual content in ads. It is agreed among many fashion enthusiasts that “Ford’s highly sexualized take on sixties and seventies silhouettes has been, in part, responsible for his astounding success [n.p.]” as *Vogue’s* Fashion encyclopedia, *Voguepedia*, explained. In Tom Ford’s case, sex does sell. In “Fashion Ads Embrace Sex to Shock and Sell” LaMont Jones calls Ford a trend setter and said that he “influenced a more homoerotic approach during his tenure at Gucci and Yves St. Laurent [n.p.]” In 2002, Ford released an ad for Yves St. Laurent’s M7 fragrance which featured a black and white photo of a completely nude man sitting exposing his penis. Images of men are not the only images. He developed Gucci’s Spring/Summer 2003 ad featuring an image of a woman’s pubic hair in the shape of Gucci’s “G”, while a man is on his knees pulling down her underwear exposing it. Nothing is more popular than Tom Ford’s ad for his own fragrance which features an up-close shot of a completely nude female with the fragrance bottle placed between her legs covering her vagina. Mower speculates in her interview, “I’m not sure Ford regrets any of the outrageous sexual imagery he put into everything Gucci, because he’s still up to his tricks today [n.p.]” When asked specifically about the ads, Ford responds “I actually think it’s beautiful. She has a perfect Brazilian wax. We’re selling to men—put the fragrance where they want to look. I want to sell it!” Ford’s ads have been banned in the US as well as in the UK with tags like “sexually explicit” and “graphic” (qtd. by Mower [n.p.]).

There is no surprise that Tom Ford directed the photo shoot that landed on United Kingdom’s top five most complained about advertisement history. Figure 3 is an Yves Saint Laurent advertisement for their Opium fragrance in 2001. The ad features a



completely nude Sophie Dahl whose skin is like milk. She's lying on her back with her legs bent and back arched. Sophie looks as though she is "enthralled in sexual rapture" (Merskin 209). This ad was considered to be "degrading to women" and therefore banned but was still able to be published in some women's magazines.(Merskin 208). There is the viewer's gaze that takes part in this ad that makes it seem degrading. It is as if she is on display and the "hierarchy of male power over female objectivity is evident in her vulnerability and positioning" according to Merskin [209]. But what if the image is solely based on her being caught up in her own pleasure, a snapshot of her isolation without the intruding viewers gaze. This ad can be considered empowering because she is a nude, beautiful woman, draped in jewelry and not the typical size two that you find often glorified in the industry. This ad could have been used to celebrate the female form in a natural size but it is immediately looked at for what it could mean negatively.

Tom Ford's approach to using sex in ads never negatively affected Gucci, YSL, or the Tom Ford brand. He was actually able to pull Gucci out of its depression and he was able to start his own brand, all while gaining the respect of everyone in the fashion industry. Gucci and YSL brands have a target market of affluent trendsetters, which probably played a role in why he did not lose business.

Fashion ads are predominately used to produce an image of the clothing that a specific company wants to sell and demonstrate how the product could be worn. Ads are a selling tactic. Many of the ads featuring sex only have about 10% of the image with clothing being shown. Some consumers are confused because it seems as if advertisers are backwards in their techniques. Show clothes to sell clothes, show nudity to sell sex. Fashion bloggers questions fashion's obsession with nudity and many are asking "where

are the clothes?” “We don’t mind nudity if there is a very good reason for it, such as sex, bathing or autopsy. The problem is, advertising seldom presents a good reason for it” (qtd. in Merskin 203). American Apparel’s sock ad is a clear example of not having a good reason for its nudity. The woman’s breasts have no relation to her naked body in the socks, yet her breasts were highlighted in the ad. Susan Heimbinder used to “love their anti-sweatshop stance and didn’t mind paying a little more for a t-shirt knowing that they were not exploiting the people that made clothes” as she told ABC News for Friedman’s article. Heimbinder finished by saying “my feelings began to shift after seeing another huge and explicit ad in New York with another, supposedly an employee, in a compromised position.” Roberta Clark, a branding expert, spoke with Friedman as well about American Apparel, saying “if you think about it from a perspective of a guy who is trying to sell his clothes, he took the cruelty-free approach, which would appeal to the animal rights PETA members, the vegetarians and the vegans, but that wasn’t enough to attract attention, and sex sells [n.p.].” For every one person who is offended by AA’s ads, there is another who isn’t but still recognizes its shocking presence.

Fashion is indeed an art. Designers should have artistic freedom. Sexual freedom should be considered as well. Dov was onto something when he mentioned that his target market strives for sexual freedom. Dov has not experienced a significant decline in his profits since his ads began featuring sexual images and he stood up for choices. In 2004, the *New York Times* interview with Dov, La Ferla had the chance to question some of Dov’s shoppers:

Jessica Fee, an entertainment agent in her 20's, was shopping last

Thursday at the Orchard Street store for "simple, clean, comfortable stuff," she

said, "that I end up wearing even though I buy other things." She could have found much the same clothing at Old Navy or the Gap instead of American Apparel. "But their marketing is a little bit sexier," she said of Mr. Charney's store. Sara Ajnwojner, 19, a native of Frankfurt, wandered into the American Apparel boutique on lower Broadway in New York. "I'm addicted to their underwear, the way it fits and makes you so nice," she said, tracing an hourglass shape in the air. She is just as taken with the company's message. "I saw a documentary in Germany that talked about how the company hires Mexican immigrants and gives them equal pay and how the workers are allowed to call back home," she said. "That is what I want to support."

In actuality Dov used sex to promote his brand and his causes, whether its sexual freedom or supporting clothing made in the US.

The fact that Abercrombie's marketing has worked in the past raises the possibility that there are other reasons for their financial woes. Perhaps their constant branding on their clothing could be the cause of declining sales. Consumers no longer want to be walking billboards for brands, which is one way American Apparel found their success. Perhaps Abercrombie has pushed all the sexual buttons with their audience and now are unable to shock people or grab consumer's attention as they used to. Americans may be desensitized by Abercrombie, but internationally, where ads tend to become banned more frequently may not be.

Abercrombie unfortunately does not seem to meet the bar as Tom Ford and American Apparel do. The retailer was successful at one point while they were pushing their very controversial catalog which played on nudity, homoerotic images, and

seemingly underage models. “Brand marketers covet tweens and teens. Girls ages eight to twelve alone generated \$6.24 billion in apparel sales” in 2009 (Monget n.p.). “Apparel spending among 13 to 18 year old girls in 2009 totaled \$25 billion” (Monget n.p.). Kids are growing up faster and dressing more provocatively. Karyn Monget and Sarah Haight of Women’s Wear Daily interviewed Marc Gobé, president of Emotional Branding LLC, who says “there is a definite sexualization of young girls. There is an inherent challenge for advertisers and marketers who straddle the boundaries between children, teens and adults. Tweens are a lot more mature today because of technology, and they clearly understand the sexual proposition of the ads they see [n.p.]. ” But can fashion ads meant for adults actually negatively affect a minor? Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*, who was also interviewed by Monget and Haight said the “one would assume that a girl who wants to dress provocatively has low self-esteem but it’s the opposite. Girls now have traits of self-centeredness and wanting to get attention [n.p.].”

Tom Ford never actually marketed to anyone too young. There are Gucci ads in several fashion magazines that minors could have access to but it has never caused a controversy as far as children are concerned until Tom Ford did an editorial for *French Vogue* in 2011 called “Cadeaux.” The editorial featured young girls who seem to be playing in their mother’s closet. The girls are decked out with jewelry, makeup, heels and very expensive, not too revealing, but mature clothing. Of course this caught the attention of adults who said that Ford was “sexualizing children.” In the 1980s, a very young, Brooke Shields was featured in the infamous Calvin Klein jean commercial advertisements that shocked America and somewhat put fashion advertising on the controversial map. She was fully clothed in those ads but her talking about her jeans in

sexual tones caused a stir. Looking back at it now, it seems very harmless. “a teenager functioning as a sex symbol had by now become, culturally speaking, accepted as normal— thanks in large part to the barrier-breaking influence of pornography on Hollywood mainstream movies” (Sarracino and Scott 22). Tom Ford’s editorial may have caused a few raised eyebrows but it has many similarities to beauty pageants. There are beauty pageants for little girls as young as one year old, which have managed to gain popularity to the point of having its own television show. Beauty pageants for little girls are booming in America. “The contours of the taboo had been sufficiently softened that, by the 1990s, children as sex objects had become culturally familiar in movies, television and advertisements (Sarracino and Scott 22). America had wave of teen idols that eventually weren’t very idealistic because they turned into sex symbols included stars like, Britney Spears, Lindsey Lohan and Miley Cyrus.

There is a morality issue that advertisers have to contemplate. Robert Passikoff, the president and chief executive officer of Brand Keys Inc. says, “it always gets sticky when you talk about morality... And there’s a question for retailers, branders and marketers of ‘should we leverage this provocative content to children because we want to make sales? (qtd. by Monget and Haight [n.p.]” Roberta Clarke in reference to American Apparel believes “Charney is intent on getting the awareness with the billboards, but with some people the perception is that this guy is engaging in pedophilia by virtue by having fairly young girls in pornographic positions. Yes there are freedoms, but there are also responsibilities. This seems irresponsible (qtd. by Monget and Haight [n.p.]” Victor Fornari is the director of child and adolescent psychiatry at North Shore University Hospital & Long Island Jewish Medical Center told Monget that “the explicit material is

sending the wrong message: it's okay to look sexy at eight or ten years old." Fornari went on to directly blame Abercrombie and stores like them. "I see young girls, younger than tweens, wearing strapless or low-cut tops and you think, 'what are they wearing and why?' Advertisers really have an opportunity and the responsibility to market appropriate fashion without all of the sex appeal. We rely on the good sense of advertisers to make good decisions (qtd. by Monget and Haight [n.p.])" Fornari explained.

Although impressionable minors can be affected by these images containing sexual undertones, it is not the designers or marketers job to shield every child in America. Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is no stranger pulling ads for content they deem inappropriate. Because there is no per say rule book on fashion advertising, it is easy to throw images out to the public and just wait for the reaction. Either way it is a win-win kind of situation for retailers because it grabbed your attention, gave you a feel for the brand, make you evaluate how you felt about the brand which requires you to take a mental memory of the image you just associated with it. The point is to get you thinking about the brand, whether it offended you or not. Fashion ads today usually aren't as wordy as they used to be in the beginning. Fashion ads are allowing you, the consumer, to reference the images and relate it to your particular lifestyle. The ad allows you to fill in the blanks and see what you want to see in it.

Fashion is subjective as should the advertising be. Designers should not be hindered with the task of editing or be restrictive in creative freedom. America is about liberty and endless possibilities. Designers cannot design with every person in the world in mind so their advertising should not be obligated to do so either. Advertisements cannot replace parent-children conversation although it can start one. It is solely up to

parents to decide what they will and will not expose their children to. At the same time, it is understood that children cannot be shielded from every influence, which is why conversations and reinforcements are needed as well. Sex is a part of nature and a part of life. If parents allow their children to form their own opinions about sex by looking at fashion ads then the opinion n they form is not the responsibility of fashion executives. Parents also don't have to buy these brands that they think are inappropriate. In actuality the parents end up being the one who is sending their children the wrong message. Parents play a far bigger role in their child's life. You cannot buy your child a skimpy outfit from the store with pictures you deem explicit and expect to not have a confused child about what is appropriate attire.

Sex has managed to influence the entire American culture. Many people don't see it because we have grown immune to visually seeing it. Conservative America used to treat sex as a sinful act. Eventually people rebelled against this way of thinking in the 1960 sex revolution. It seems as it is reverting back to those confined ways when we should be embracing the idea that sexualism exists. Sarracino and Scott are revealed that sex has managed to sneak into America's everyday lives. "And we are thankful that our children will grow up in an atmosphere of sexual freedom that that will spare them most of the ignorance, hypocrisy, and repression of earlier times" (Saracino and Scott IX).

South African, Victoria's Secret model, Candice Swanepoel recently did a modeling campaign for shoe designer Brian Atwood. The ad included a billboard to be placed on the building of his New York flagship store and a short commercial. The ad was apparently too explicit. "The owner of the building housing Brain Atwood's shoe

store on Madison Avenue in New York demanded they be pulled down” (Herald [n.p.]). Swanepoel proudly defended her advertisement.

"I respect that they banned it in certain places. Not everybody is that comfortable with their sexuality, with showing your body. But for me, it's not a problem. I'm proud of my body. I work hard for my body, as long as it's always done in a tasteful way which it was, I'm fine with it, Swanepoel said in a news conference in Mexico” (qtd. by Herald [n.p.]).

Swanepoel’s confidence is admirable. If more people were comfortable with their bodies and viewed it as something other than inappropriate, then maybe there wouldn’t be as many complaints to advertising authorities.

*Harper’s Bazaar*, *Elle* and *Vogue* advertisements do not negatively affect everyone. Fashion ads are one ingredient that makes future fashion designers fall in love with fashion. People choose to see these as a corruption when, sexually explicit tones have been used in past advertisements for everything from cigarettes to cleaning supplies. Consumers should embrace fashion’s advertisement’s artistic expressions versus trying to see it for all its possible negative qualities.





**Figure 1.** Abercrombie & Fitch ad on Orchard Road in Singapore in 2011.



**Figure 2.** Alyssa Ferguson modeling American Apparel Riding Pants. Photo taken Fall 2010.



**Figure 3.** Sophie Dahl for Yves Saint Laurent Opium fragrance 2000  
Directed by Tom Ford    Photographer: Steven Meisel

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