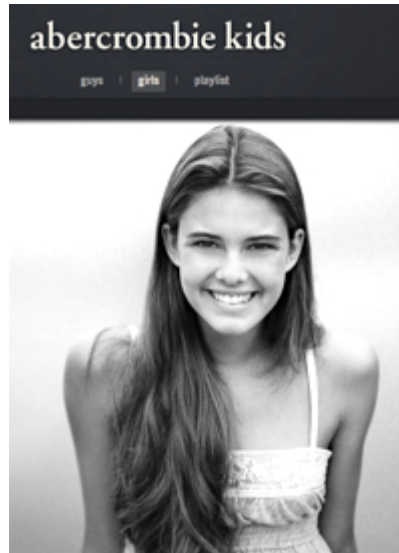




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on May 16, 2011

Study Finds Retailers Marketing Inappropriate Clothing for Pre-Teen Girls

A new study conducted by a college in Ohio has found that up to a third of pre-teen girls' clothing available online in the U.S. is designed to be sexualizing. "Researchers led by Sarah Murnen, a professor of psychology at Kenyon College in Ohio, looked at 15 websites of popular clothing stores, ranging from bargain to high-end sectors of the junior US market," reported AFP News. The researchers found that clothing marketed for girls as young as six is being designed to draw attention to their breasts, buttocks, and slimness, sending out signals that are sensuous and inappropriate. The researchers say it is a trend that is reinforcing destructive stereotypes for female attractiveness.



The study looked at the "the frequency and nature of 'sexualizing' clothing" offered on the 15 popular clothing websites, defining it as apparel that "revealed or emphasized a sexualized body part, had characteristics associated with sexiness, and/or had sexually suggestive writing." Additionally, researchers looked for such childlike characteristics in clothing as polka-dot patterned fabric or a modest, non-revealing tailoring.

In their evaluation of 5,666 articles of clothing for sale on the websites, the researchers found that 69 percent of girls' clothing had only childlike characteristics, another four percent featured predominantly sexualizing characteristics, and over 25 percent included a confusing mixture of both childlike and sexualizing features.

"Clothing was rated according to whether it had only childlike characteristics, revealed or emphasized an intimate body part, or had characteristics that were associated with sexiness," AFP reported of the study. "An example of a 'childlike' characteristic would be a top with a butterfly print in pastel colors." By contrast, "a bikini was coded as 'revealing' because it exposed the waist and part of the chest. The bikini was considered 'emphasizing' if, for instance, it outlined each breast with triangular pieces of fabric." Likewise, AFP noted, "highly decorated back pockets on trousers — adorned, for instance, with a bird or sequins — were deemed 'emphasizing' because they drew attention to the buttocks." Similarly, material that had the characteristics of lingerie — such as suggestive red or black fabric — or had leopard or zebra prints was categorized as having sexualizing characteristics.

The researchers found that more sexualization of girls clothing was found in pre-teen — or "tween" — stores like [Abercrombie Kids](#) (ad pictured above), which, reported AFP, "came under fire in 2002 for selling thong underwear in children's sizes with 'wink wink' and 'eye candy' printed across the front." In a press release the researchers said that their findings, published in the online journal [Sex Roles](#),



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have “serious implications for how girls evaluate themselves according to a sexualized model of feminine physical attractiveness. It makes them confront the issue of sexual identity at a very young age.”

The lead researchers wrote that the study “presents the ‘ambiguously sexualizing’ category of girls’ clothing,” arguing that the “co-occurrence of sexualizing and childlike characteristics makes the sexualization present in girls’ clothing covert.” They added that the mixed signals are confusing to parents, who “might be persuaded to buy the leopard-print miniskirt if it’s bright pink. Clearly, sexiness is still visible beneath the bows or tie-dye colors. We propose that dressing girls in this way could contribute to socializing them into the narrow role of the sexually objectified woman.”

An article in the [Canadian Press](#) suggested that there is an intentional marketing strategy by clothing retailers who are trying to condition brand loyalty into consumers at an early age. “A U.S. retail chain recently added fuel to the long-simmering debate surrounding products and imagery of a sexually suggestive nature being marketed towards girls,” wrote Canadian Press reporter Lauren La Rose. “In March, Abercrombie and Fitch made headlines after featuring push-up bikini tops for girls in the spring line of its children’s label. Amid the uproar, Abercrombie Kids announced it would continue to sell the Ashley swimsuit which it recategorized as ‘padded,’ stating on its Facebook page the label agreed with those who said it was best ‘suited’ for girls age 12 and older.”

Lyn Mikel Brown of Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a liberal-leaning non-profit group that promotes the well-being of girls and women, told La Rose: “Marketers employ developmental psychologists. They know absolutely what kids want. It’s not so much [that kids] want sexy products, but they want to be different from their parents. They want to fit in, be cool, be hip. And frankly, I think they really use the sexualization stuff because it does upset parents and because this is a way young girls can say: ‘I’m grown up.’ “

Retailers are also capitalizing on the cultural obsession with body image among young women, with Skechers, a popular shoe retailer, recently introducing a line of “Shape Up” shoes for little girls, a move that is sending a harmful message, said the [Parents Television Council](#), that girls as young as eight need to think about toning up their buttocks and thighs.

Writing on [CafeMom.com](#), Julie Ryan Evans noted that a “Shape Up” TV advertisement hawking the work-out shoes for girls (there’s no version for boys) was sending the unmistakable message that “looking good is what matters when you’re a GIRL. The boys will chase you if you do....”

Added Evans: “Even though the smallest size starts at a 2, which typically fits a 7-year-old, the commercial for the shoes is played on Nickelodeon and other channels watched by toddlers who are soaking up all these great messages too. If the girls’ shoes sell, I doubt Skechers would have any scruples making a toddler model.”



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