Letter From The Editor

Welcome to the annual special edition of CosmoGirl magazine! This is your faithful editor-in-chief, Janelle, bringing you the latest issues that concern teenagers like you.

Recently, I picked up a book composed by the Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada called Youth Talk Back: Sex, Sexuality, and Media Literacy. The book addressed some topics that I thought were really interesting and thought-provoking. Here are some excerpts from YTB:

Where do our attitudes about sex and sexuality come from? Some people say that parents are a major influence because our attitudes are formed when we are very young. Others say peers affect us more. However, most agree that the mass media plays an influential role in shaping our attitudes about sex and sexuality.

When we speak of the “mass media,” we are talking about all the ways that information is given to you that does not come from individuals. These include TV, the Internet, radio, magazines, newspapers, billboards, and even books.

The mass media is a multi-billion dollar business. The people who own magazines, newspapers, and television stations are usually in it to make money. The easiest way to make money is to sell advertising space [...] Advertising is a legitimate way for a business to communicate with consumers in a capitalist society. Ads are designed to persuade us that we need this product or brand. For that reason, ads often appeal to us on an emotional level. The subtle and not-so-subtle implications are that if we wear/eat/drive a certain brand name, we will become smarter, more attractive, sexier, more popular, happier, etc.

An old saying in advertising is “sex sells.” Advertisers who subscribe to this often use scantily clad young women in ads designed to sell everything from cars, to perfume, to backpacks [...]

This particular issue of “sex sells” in advertising really caught my attention, and I thought it would be interesting to further examine sexuality in the mass media. So, in this year’s issue, we will explore the pervasiveness of sex in today’s popular culture. In particular, we’ll focus on the media’s use of sexuality in advertising its products and its affect on the views and morals of American society.

When the CosmoGirl staff decided to focus on the prominence of sexuality in advertising, we thought to ourselves, “Who embodied the notion of sex and sexuality in today’s popular culture?”, and one name instantly popped into our heads – Britney Spears. Since hitting the scene in 1999, Spears has been a nonstop, money-making machine with her music and movie career,
as well as her product endorsements. Recently, she signed a multiyear global marketing deal with Pepsi to promote the soft drink. She is only the latest spokesperson in Pepsi’s new advertising campaign in which they employ the most popular female artists in an attempt to increase its sales and give its biggest competitor, Coca-Cola, a run for its money. The company’s current roster includes belly-dancing Latin sensation, Shakira; Destiny’s Child lead singer and ‘Miss Foxy Cleopatra’ herself, Beyoncé Knowles; and the ‘not so innocent’ pop princess, Britney Spears.

Concentrating on Spears’ Pepsi endorsement, we posted a particularly sexually geared advertisement on our official website and, explaining our objective of sexuality in the media, we asked for everyone’s personal opinions about it.
We received an astonishing 10,000 replies to our post – thank you so much! You guys rock! With great difficulty, we managed to narrow it down to just a few and chose two very different responses.

The first response comes from 16-year-old Mike S. from Los Angeles, California, who sent us an honest email about his views on the use of sex in advertising along with a transcript of an instant messaging (IM) conversation with one of his friends that addresses Spears’ Pepsi ad.

The second response comes from Angelica Hart, Ph.D., a feminist who has published several books on this very topic. In her letter, she very candidly expresses her feelings on the media’s use of sexuality.

Finally, we interviewed Britney Spears herself and asked for her opinion on today’s oversexed culture, her defense of her Pepsi endorsement, and her response to Mike and Angelica’s respective letters.

So, go on and read three very different perspectives on this issue of sexuality in advertising in our special CosmoGirl issue titled, “Pepsi=Pimp?”

Much Luv,

Janelle
The first response in our CosmoGirl special edition comes from Mike who sent us an email weighing in on sexuality in advertising.

From: “Mike S.” <surferdude@hotmail.com>
To: pepsi_ad_input@cosmogirl.com
Subject: Britney Spears Pepsi Ad
Date: Sun, 4 Jan 2003 21:17:04

What’s up? My name is Mike and I’m a 16-year-old guy from Los Angeles, California. I’m writing this email in response to the post on your website about Britney Spears’ Pepsi ad. I thought your question about the frequency of sexuality in advertisements was interesting, and I wanted to share my views on the issue.

Now, I don’t read your magazine or listen to Britney Spears’ music or any of that bubblegum pop music crap. I just happened to come across your post when my younger sister wouldn’t get off the computer so I could get on the internet. When I finally got her off, I saw that she was on your website, so I was going to log off until I saw this ad of Britney on the homepage:

I remembered talking to one of my buddies about that same exact picture a couple of days ago, and I thought our conversation would be the perfect example of what a normal, red-blooded, all body parts working (if you know what I mean) kind of guy would think when he saw that image.

Personally, I think this whole “sex sells” business is a bunch of crap. Sure, an ad with an almost naked chick or a chick wearing sexy clothes on it would get my attention, but it wouldn’t make me want to go out and buy whatever they’re selling. I’m more concerned about the quality of the product rather than which celebrity is promoting it and what they may, or may not, be wearing. Unless it’s an ad for Playboy or something like that, I don’t see the point of having barely clothed or “sexed up” people trying to sell breath mints.

Take that whole Abercrombie and Fitch scandal, for example. I thought they were a clothing company for goodness sakes. But when I looked through one of
their catalogues, all I saw were almost naked dudes (eww) and chicks. I was like, “What exactly are they trying to sell?” It was like soft porn for teenagers. A & F’s strategy of “sex sells” definitely doesn’t make me want to go out and buy their clothes, if they even do sell clothes. Anyway, I attached a transcript of my chat with my friend to this email. It should give you some real insight about how Britney Spears’ Pepsi ad influences people, especially guys like me.

Peace,
Mike

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Surferdude: hey, rob, u on?
RockRulez: yeah, i’m here.
Surferdude: dude, u would not believe what i just saw.
RockRulez: what?
Surferdude: there’s this picture of britney spears with all her ass-ets hanging out, if u know what i mean :)?
RockRulez: dude, send it to me!
Surferdude: hold on
Surferdude: did u get it?
RockRulez: yeah, she is so freakin hot, man
Surferdude: tell me about it
Surferdude: i would definitely do her
RockRulez: lol, like u would have a chance with a chick like her
Surferdude: u never know
RockRulez: yeah, whatever
Surferdude: look @ her boobs
Surferdude: they look bigger than usual
Surferdude: do u think they’re real?
RockRulez: i don’t know
RockRulez: i’m too busy checking out those thong straps
RockRulez: i wonder what’s going on down there ;0)
Surferdude: :0)
RockRulez: nice abs
Surferdude: very nice
Surferdude: man, why can’t the girls @ school look like her?
Surferdude: she’s perfect
Surferdude: not to mention that i love blondes, especially tanned ones
Surferdude: i bet she’s a freak, she did say that she wasn’t innocent
RockRulez: well, u know what they say, blondes have more fun
RockRulez: i wonder if she’ll do anything more risqué
RockRulez: i mean, if she wears something like this for a pepsi ad, what else would she wear?
Surferdude: this is a pepsi ad?!?!
Dear CosmoGirl Staff,

My name is Angelica Hart, and I have a Ph.D. in feminist studies that I obtained from Stanford University, where I also teach a class on the subject. Also, being a mother of two young girls - ages five and ten - a wife for sixteen years, and a feminist, I am profoundly affected by the use of sexuality in the media, including advertisements such as the Pepsi ads featuring Britney Spears that have bombarded our television screens, magazines, and billboards since the company launched their new advertising campaign.

When I saw this particular ad with Britney Spears, I was completely and utterly disgusted. My stance on this whole issue is that women have struggled for countless number of years trying to gain the respect and appreciation that we deserve. By Britney Spears - a female icon in today’s popular culture - agreeing to promote Pepsi-Cola by using her sexual image, she is single-handedly reducing women’s social status in society.

Spears’ ad is promoting the belief in our society that women are merely sexual objects, and Pepsi is eagerly capitalizing on this belief. In the ad, Spears is wearing her trademark belly-baring top and low-cut jeans with the straps of her thong way above the top of her jeans, a very strategic move made by Pepsi to influence sexual thoughts in its audience. Her lightning necklace which is very conveniently positioned between and aimed at her ample cleavage also emphasizes sex and her sexuality. Basically, the company is “pimping” Spears...
and her sexual appeal to viewers in order to sell their product to this oversexed civilization.

This ad also promotes a poor body image in the young girls and female teenagers who see it. The overall colors that make up this image – red, white, and blue, or the colors of the American flag – suggest that this is the way all American females should look. They should have long, blonde hair, a white smile, large breasts, a flat stomach, and an ever-present tan. This image makes teen girls feel like they must emulate her, especially when they see guys who express how much they are attracted to Britney and girls like her. This eventually makes these girls go to extreme lengths in order to look like her, including compromising their personal values and even their health.

Furthermore, it can be argued that it promotes a lack of respect for women by men and encourages violent acts, such as rape, against females. Upon seeing this ad, some men may believe that all women who dress like that are “easy” and want what is coming to them.

Overall, Pepsi’s choice to use sexuality in their advertisements and pimping Britney Spears’ sexual appeal in order to sell their soft drink, as well as any other companies that use this tactic, just shows their lack of creativity when it concerns promoting their product. I guess this just shows how much sex in the media has diluted our culture.

Sincerely,

Angelica Hart

Angelica Hart

Compiled By: Claire Martin
The third response in our CosmoGirl special edition comes from Britney Spears herself as she answers our questions about today’s oversexed culture, her Pepsi endorsement, and Mike and Angelica’s letters.

Q&A With Britney Spears
CG: Hi, Britney. How are you doing?

BS: I’m doing great. Thanks.

CG: I know you’re a very busy woman, so I’ll get straight to the point. The special issue of CosmoGirl that we’re doing this interview for is examining the media’s use of sexuality in advertising its products and its affect on the views and morals of the American society. What are your feelings on the emphasis of sex in today’s society?

BS: I don’t want to sound like a cliché, but in today’s society, sex sells. Being in the entertainment business – the music industry – you need to attract your audience’s attention in order to get them to listen to what you have to say. Once you’ve got their attention, that’s how you get them to appreciate you as an artist with the quality of your music. So, I guess for the rest of society, when they use sex in advertising products, they use it to attract the consumer’s attention to their product so they could learn and appreciate the quality of that product.

CG: What about the indirect effects of these sexual ads on individuals in our society, like the female teenagers that read our magazine? What views or values do you think these ads promote in these young girls?

BS: I think they may make young girls feel like they have to measure up to these beautiful, sexy people who are in these ads. But they have to remember that most of it is not real. When they think that these people are perfect, it’s only because of all the behind the scenes stuff that makes it appear that way. Imperfections are airbrushed with computers, your clothes are pinned in the back to make it fit better, there are makeup artists to cover up that huge zit on your face. Everything they see is staged and these young girls just need to realize that.
CG: That brings us to your recent Pepsi campaign. You were able to read the two responses to your Pepsi ad sent in by Mike S. and Angelica Hart. What do you have to say about their letters and your ad?

BS: Well, first off, I don’t think my endorsement of Pepsi is in no way reducing women’s social status in society. In fact, I think it shows the exact opposite. The fact that I am a woman and I’m even endorsing Pepsi in the first place shows how much power women have achieved over the years. Now that we are able to have our own careers and have a say in them is a huge accomplishment in itself. I think the ad would be more empowering to women than a letdown. This might sound a little silly, but when I look at this ad, and I see myself holding up that Pepsi can, I think of it as a kind of trophy that we as women can proudly hold up and say, “We’ve made it.” You know I mean?

CG: I understand.

BS: Also, the only reason I’m wearing red, white, and blue is because it’s the colors of the Pepsi trademark. It was not a calculated maneuver in any way in order to suggest that this is the way girls should look. It’s a complete coincidence that Pepsi’s trademark is the same colors as the American flag. And the clothes I’m wearing is just a statement of who I am as a person. Sometimes I like to wear cute little tops that show off my belly and I like to wear low rider jeans that show off a little of my thong strap. Just because I dress this way doesn’t mean everyone else should. And if people find the way that I dress sexy, well, that’s their personal opinions. I just wear what I feel comfortable in and, like I said before, it’s just a statement of who I am.

CG: What about the statement that Pepsi is “pimping” you?

BS: (Laughs) I thought that was hilarious. Pepsi is definitely not pimping me in any way, shape, or form. I’m the one who decided to dress this way for the photo shoot, basically, I’m the one who’s calling the shots regarding my endorsement of Pepsi. So, I thought that comment was really ridiculous. (Laughs again) Wouldn’t it be the other way around, though? I’m the one who is promoting their product, so aren’t I pimping Pepsi?

CG: Good point. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Britney.

BS: No problem.

Interview By: Mary Gordon
Editor’s Note

Hey, CosmoGirl readers! I hoped you enjoyed reading this special edition of the magazine. After reading through the first draft of the issue before it hit the printers, I remembered another candid statement from YTB that I felt I should address:

The easiest way to make money is to sell advertising space. If more people watch a TV show or read a particular magazine, the owner can charge more money for the advertising space. That’s why producers and editors make products that many people will watch or read. More people means more money!

Also keep in mind that the mass media is not a living, breathing entity plotting to play with our minds. The media don’t do anything. It is the people that decide what to print or broadcast who control the media. Station managers and magazine owners are trying to produce something that YOU will like. So in a way, you are partly responsible for what the media are producing.

Being the editor of a major publication like CosmoGirl, I have to make decisions about what will and will not grace the pages of the magazine. In a sense, YTB is right in that we are trying to produce something that the reader will like and that includes seeing sexually appealing celebrities, like Britney Spears, in the magazine. But I also feel a moral responsibility for allowing something to be printed that I think will influence my readers in a possibly negative way, especially knowing that the majority of CosmoGirl readers are teenage girls. But the conflict becomes even more complicated when the issue of money is factored in. Basically, it’s a catch-22 situation. So, I thought this particular edition brought up issues that were extremely important not only to our readers, but to the CosmoGirl staff as well.

My opinion on each of the arguments presented about the use of sex in advertising is that I agree with certain aspects of all of them. I think some companies that use sexuality in their ads to sell their products don’t work, especially when they’re trying to sell totally unrelated things like breath mints (thanks, Mike). I also believe sexual ads can inadvertently have a negative influence on the audience it is attracting, but they can have a positive influence by empowering its audience with images of powerful individuals as well.

Right now, I am developing an idea to possibly publish in another special edition of CosmoGirl in which we examine if sexually geared advertisements actually help increase the sales of its product. Until then, keep reading CosmoGirl for the latest issues that concern teenagers like you!
Works Cited


