

Age of promiscuity?

Focus on sexiness damaging to girls, experts, parents warn

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From advertisements to magazine covers, the image of the promiscuous girl is being celebrated.

With her hit "Promiscuous," singer Nelly Furtado sold more albums than ever after she sexed up her image. Party girls Paris Hilton and Britney Spears forget underwear for a night out, and teen girls echo those images on their MySpace pages.

All this has caught the attention of parents, educators and authors, and it also has caught the attention of the American Psychological Association, which last month released a report called "The Sexualization of Girls."

In the report, six female psychologists and educators argue that these images are damaging to girls' self-image and mental health, teaching them to objectify themselves.

Anecdotal evidence is all over pop culture:

Bratz dolls, designed for 4- to-8-year-olds, flew off the shelves last year. The dolls are known for their sexy clothing: miniskirts, fishnet stockings and feather boas. But what concerns experts more is what the Bratz do — or, actually, what they don't do.

"They're marketed as a sexy, Paris Hilton version of teens," says Lyn Mikel Brown, a professor of education at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, and author of "Packaging Girlhood" (St. Martin's Press). Bratz are about fashion, shopping, clubbing and not much else, Brown says. But Boyz, their male counterparts, exit their boxes ready for action, equipped with soccer balls and skateboards.

Singer Fergie's latest CD was listed by Amazon.com as one of the top 10 things "every teen girl wants for the holidays."

The CD included the song "Fergalicious" and included lyrics insisting that Fergie is not "easy," "sleazy" or "promiscuous."

Fergie sings those lyrics in her video while wearing a tiny Girl Scout uniform — a cropped, midriff-baring top and a short, pleated skirt. She also dons a bathing suit and rolls in cake, singing about how "delicious" she is.

Clothing stores for tweens are increasingly selling sexy clothes, such as camisoles, lacy panties and thongs.

"Attitude" T-shirts are available for all ages, such as the ones from Abercrombie and Fitch that a group of Pennsylvania teens "girlcotted." Among the slogans were: "Blondes are Adored, Brunettes are Ignored" and "Who needs brains when you have these?"

A real-life crew of Bratz — Spears, Hilton and Lindsay Lohan — is currently more famous for partying than talent. The Web lets us to follow their every move: rehab stints, DUIs and those nights when underwear just didn't go with the outfit.

Educators argue that this shift toward female sexualization is teaching girls to value their sexiness as a commodity, as something that can be traded for power, money, popularity or winning the boys.

"It's almost like sexualization keeps them in their place; it keeps them down," says Tomi-Ann Roberts, one of the authors of the psychology association's study and a professor at Colorado College.

The trend could be traced all the way back to the 19th century, but experts think that in recent years, it seems to have stemmed from the "girl power" focus in the late '90s, the years of female empowerment programs for girls. The third-wave feminist movement introduced the notion that women could be into wearing pink high heels and still be powerful, successful and smart.

"Marketers picked up on the prettiness and left the real power stuff behind," Brown says.

The association's report links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems girls and women face: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression. Some of the consequences, the report says, include:

Comparison between one's own body and cultural standards, leading to feelings of inadequacy and shame.

A tendency to focus more on a partner's judgments of one's appearance than on one's own desires, safety and pleasure.

There was a significant jump in plastic surgery for teens between 2000 and 2005. Invasive cosmetic surgery increased 15 percent, and procedures such as botox injections, chemical peels or laser hair removal, increased 7 percent.

Experts encourage girls and their parents who are concerned by this issue to voice their opinions. And parents should discuss with daughters issues such as gender stereotypes and sexualization. Ask them why they like it and what's attractive to them, and then have a real conversation.