



Sex, kids and ads: corporate paedophilia?

Pressure is mounting for tougher regulation of the advertising industry after widespread criticism of several ads aimed at young girls that some say are no less than corporate paedophilia. CLARE KERMOND reports.

SPREAD before you in a page-length photo is a pretty girl of uncertain age seated on the floor, her legs apart under a pastel party dress, a large flower-shaped bottle held close to her crotch.

In another advertisement is a jumble of kids, fully dressed, mucking about and happily eating ice-cream.

Which of these advertisements was banned? The second — for Paddle Pop ice-creams.

That complaints about the first ad — for Marc Jacobs's Oh, Lola! perfume — were dismissed by Australia's advertising watchdog late last year, while the seemingly innocuous ice-cream ad was condemned because it failed to encourage good eating habits, has fuelled frustration with the advertising industry and the regulations that govern it.

On one side are those who believe that advertising self-regulation has resulted in an inconsistent regime that is weakly enforced and ultimately fails to protect children.

On the other are those who say enforceable regulations will be costly and ineffective, and are unnecessary.

The Oh, Lola! ad, featuring the winsome actress Dakota Fanning — with not-so-subtle references to the notorious story of a middle-aged man's

notorious story of a middle-aged man's sexual relationship with a young girl in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* — was banned in Britain.

But in Australia, the Advertising Standards Bureau found it "was not an image that sexualises young women".

That decision and the bureau's ban on the Paddle Pop ad were among the issues thrashed out at a recent conference in Melbourne where debate focused on the corporatisation and sexualisation of children in advertising campaigns and how to regulate this area — or, indeed, whether it should be regulated.

Several incidents in Australia have sparked huge outcries, with critics coining the term "corporate paedophilia" for ads that, in their view, veer close to being sexually exploitative.

While "tween" fashion is a fast-growing market, many are alarmed by the ad campaigns designed by some chains to push their clothes to pre-pubescent.

Anti-"exploitation" movement Collective Shout, in its "Cross 'Em Off Your List" campaign, organised a boycott of the tween jewellery store Diva for selling Playboy-branded jewellery alongside Winnie the Pooh and Disney Princess products.

Other offenders on Collective Shout's list include Bras N Things, for using the Playboy brand and selling a "teacher's





pet” dress-up outfit, and teen fashion favourite Supre, for ad campaigns that include an image of a topless young woman and T-shirts brandishing slogans such as “Santa’s Bitch” and “Pussy Power”.

The Cotton On chain was the target of a consumer boycott over a children’s range that featured slogans such as “The condom broke” and “I’m living proof my mum is easy”.

And Roger David attracted howls of protest for a campaign that depicted a teenage girl with the word “slave” on her bare shoulder and her mouth stuffed with a Union Jack disc.

The Advertising Standards Bureau asked the menswear chain to withdraw the ad.

Professor Elizabeth Handsley, head of the Australian Council on Children and the Media, argues that advertisers are increasingly targeting children with the kinds of messages they have been selling to adult women.

“This sort of marketing is telling children that you have to look a certain

way . . . you need to own and use certain products in order to be happy and successful,” she says.

“And quite often those products are things that we do normally associate with women and their attempts to be sexy for men — things like make-up and clothes and high heels — that are creeping into childhood.”

At present, complaints about ads go to the Advertising Standards Bureau, which considers each case by reference to a code of ethics.

The code deems that the implication of sexual appeal in any image of a child “will always be regarded as exploitative and degrading”.

Critics say this does not go far enough, and allows too many ads to slip through the net.

And the bureau’s decisions are not binding — advertisers are asked to modify or withdraw ads deemed to breach the code.

An increasing number of parent groups want tougher and binding regulations.



The ad that Roger David was asked to withdraw.





Among them are Collective Shout and Kids Free 2 Be Kids, which target products and marketing that sexualise children; the Parents' Jury, which lobbies against junk food; and the Obesity Policy Coalition.

WHILE there is loud outcry over ads that depict young girls in supermodel poses or pushing risqué clothes more suited to an older demographic, many advocates believe that the emphasis should be just as firmly on inappropriate eating habits and health.

The Paddle Pop ad was the first to be banned by the Advertising Standards Bureau under a section of the Responsible Children's Marketing Initiative, which allows the regulator to ask that an ad be removed or changed if it fails to encourage good eating habits or physical activity.

While the intention is to protect children from being bombarded with ads for fattening or inappropriate food and drinks, figures released recently by the Cancer Council suggest plenty of ads for junk food are slipping through the regulatory net.

According to the Fat Free TV Guide website, launched by the Cancer Council last month, children watching

Saturday afternoon football are bombarded by more junk-food ads than during any other timeslot.

And in a six-hour timeslot, the three unhealthiest shows pelted kids with 26 ads for high-energy drinks, fast-food chains and chocolate.

Yet under the various codes of conduct and standards governing the advertising industry, there is nothing wrong with this.

Public health advocate Professor Rob Moodie is among those calling for governments to force the advertising industry into compulsory regulation.

Self-regulation, he says, has clearly failed and co-regulation is the next logical step.

"Advertising for this kind of thing (junk food) has become such an insidious part of ours and our children's lives.

"They have normalised junk food, normalised junk drinks. There is huge support from parents to do something about this but governments of all persuasions seem to find it too hard."

Moodie says governments face a fierce battle against the food and drink lobby, as well as the advertising industry.

"Long ago we had the Marlboro Man. These (junk food) companies might not be using tobacco, but they are using the same techniques."





The Oh, Lola! perfume advertisement that was banned in Britain but not Australia.