

Why are we dressing our daughters like this?

Eight-year-olds in fishnets, padded 'bralettes' and thong panties: Welcome to the Junior Miss version of raunch culture

LIANNE GEORGE | Jan 01, 2007

An article from *Macleans Magazine*

In his most recent visual tome, *Katlick School*, the famed American fashion photographer Sante D'Orazio examines the titillating power of the Catholic schoolgirl uniform -- a fetish, his publishers write, "as psycho-sexually resonant as the black motorcycle jacket or the nurse's uniform." The book chronicles the coming of age of Kat, a "beautiful Latina schoolgirl," whose sexual curiosity grows increasingly outsized for her pleated skirt and bobby socks. (It's not the most original idea, maybe, but it's a crowd-pleaser.) Kat's unravelling begins with flashes of Snoopy underwear. In a matter of pages, she's traded in her pressed plaid uniform for nothing but a pair of thigh-high spike-heeled boots. "I was experimenting with a symbol of virginity, the untouched, the ideal, the romantic notion of the pure," says D'Orazio, who famously enshrined Pamela Anderson in the canon of erotic coffee-table literature in 2005 with *Pam: American Icon*. "That is what the uniform signifies."

The book also signifies something rather less high-minded -- it's a lascivious ode to the cultural muse of the moment, the Lolita. Shortly after it was launched last month, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights registered its disgust in the *New York Post* (after which, not coincidentally, sales of *Katlick School* spiked). And yet, the response was not entirely honest. Because if there is one iconic symbol of the girl-about-to-go-wild, it's the schoolgirl uniform -- and the Catholic community is well aware of it.

Even before Britney Spears paired a kilt with pigtails and a midriff-baring blouse in the 1998 video that launched her career, the kilt was a source of deep discomfort for Catholic schoolteachers, administrators and parents. Rules evolved to control its power: it should be three inches from the knee -- no higher -- and one Canadian uniform manufacturer even patented the X-Kilt, with built-in shorts to prevent girls from transforming them into miniskirts. So far, in Ontario alone, at least seven Catholic schools have voted to phase out the garment altogether. "It always has been an issue," says Ron Crocco, principal of St. Augustine Catholic High School in Markham, Ont., where the kilt was banned in 2003. "As a male, it's difficult to enforce, to say: your kilt is too short. Because then, why am I looking there?" In a post-Britney era, it seems, the kilt is just too sexy for school.

How, then, to explain the low-slung jeans, sequined halter tops and lacy miniskirts that so many young girls are wearing to class? In fact, in the broader universe of children's clothing, "Why am I looking there?" has become an increasingly pressing question. Streetwear for little girls has never been more overtly provocative. Girls as young as 6 are adopting the external cues of womanhood, adorning themselves not only with lip gloss and nail polish, but also body sprays, skin glitters and spa lotions. Club Libby Lu, a Saks Fifth Avenue spinoff with 62 outlets across the United States, invites "super fabulous girls" ages 6 and up to book "sparkle spa" makeover parties for their friends.

North American retailers like La Senza Girl, Abercrombie & Fitch and Limited Too sell fishnet stockings, skinny jeans, message panties and padded "bralettes" in micro-sizes. In 2002, Abercrombie & Fitch launched its infamous kiddie thong collection, arguing that girls as young as 10 "are style-conscious and want underwear that doesn't produce a Visible Panty Line." (They have since dropped the line.) Earlier this month, the New York designer Marc Jacobs, having his pick of every grown-up bombshell in Hollywood, tapped 12-year-old Dakota Fanning, star of the newly released *Charlotte's Web*, to be the face of his latest womenswear collection.

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Meanwhile, in an odd inversion of the Lolita trend, women old enough to vote are embracing the trappings of girlhood, with varying degrees of tongue-in-cheek. Victoria's Secret's lingerie collections have innocent, girlie names like "Angels" and "Pink." Starlets such as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears tote around miniature dogs in tutus -- called Tinkerbell and Bit Bit -- as though they were cuddly stuffed animals. In her latest video, *Fergalicious*, the musician Fergie is dressed in a sexed-up Brownie uniform, surrounded by a troupe of bootie-popping Brownie dancers. Last month, the British retailer Tesco landed in hot water over a pole-dancing kit for sale on its website. The kit, packaged in a pink plastic tube, featured an illustrated Barbie-type character and bubble letters that read: "Unleash the sex kitten inside." It was inadvertently placed on the site's children's toy section, where it looked so entirely at home that none of the Web designers questioned it. Perhaps most creepily, we're in a moment when one of the latest celebrity "trends" -- exemplified by Spears and Lindsay Lohan -- is to expose one's privates, completely waxed to look like a 10-year-old's, from the backseat of a car.

The eroticization of girlhood -- once the stuff of Russian literature, Atom Egoyan films, Japanese comic books and good old-fashioned American porn -- has been seeping ever more into the larger culture. Now it is one of our dominant aesthetics. In a Lolita-tinged culture, whether the sell is "my body is underdeveloped, but I am precocious" or "my brain is underdeveloped, but I am stacked," the message is the same: exploit me. "For adult women, that notion of being kind of girlie and innocent and sexually pure, as well as very sexy, has been in men's magazines forever," says Lyn Mikel Brown, co-author of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*. But whether it's because of the pornification of culture or the extreme worship of youth, the trend has migrated to ever younger age groups. Add this to the fact that the physiological onset of puberty itself keeps inching downward, and the definitions of "girl" and "women" have become moving targets. Which raises the question: what does it mean for little girls when the very things of their lives -- kilts, puppies, angels, pink, princesses -- become fetishized to the point of rendering them obscene?

In stores marketing to young girls, a phenomenon that the authors of *Packaging Girlhood* have termed "the pink wars" is easy to discern. There's the sweet, innocent "princess" girl (baby pink) and the saucy, naughty "diva" girl (hot pink). The two aesthetics are clearly delineated in the selection of novelty T-shirts on offer. A "princess," for instance, would wear one of these scrawled across her chest: *Sweet Treats, Angel, Daddy's Girl, Official Cheer Bunny*. While a "diva" would gravitate toward: *Trouble-maker, Drama Queen, You Will Do What I Say*, and of course, Paris Hilton's idiotic tag line, *That's Hot*. But T-shirts are just the beginning. It is the "total girl" marketers are after, write Brown and Sharon Lamb in *Packaging Girlhood*. " 'Total girl' to marketers means finding every inch of their body to adorn," they write. "Expanding one's market means not just reaching down to the lower ages for products introduced to the older ages, but finding new parts of their bodies to colonize or own. The tiniest parts, the forgotten parts, such as nails, which should be dirty after a day of play." Implicit in the various products available is a sexy wink that has never before been associated with children so young.

Or so we think. The idea of children as innocent is a relatively modern one. "Children are the great vessels of fantasy," says Anne Hollander, a New York-based clothing historian and author of the classic 1978 text *Seeing Through Clothes*. Historically, a mother saw a little girl as a smaller, unspoiled version of herself, and so a daughter should be formed in her mother's image -- and through most of history, she was. Up until the late 18th century, children, both male and female, were outfitted like little adults. Labourers' children dressed like labourers, and society children dressed like their elders, in garments designed for their pomp and rigidity to encourage socially appropriate behaviour. Moreover,

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says Hollander, royal children were dressed to look sexually attractive so that heads of state in other countries might look at their portraits and think, hmm, maybe I'd like to marry that sweet thing. "Girls of 6 wore low-cut dresses and very fetching hairdos," she says. "You can see it in the paintings, all meant to be sent off to Louis XV or some such. They don't have any breasts yet, but never mind."

It was only with the advent of the Romantic period in the late 1700s that modern notions of childhood arose, inspired largely by the sentimental writings of the Swiss-born philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "As the 18th century took on its second half," says Hollander, "you have an idea that children are a separate marvellous, terribly fragile, impressionable, innocent kind of creature that needs freedom and liberty of all kinds. There was the sense of nature infusing everything. They get to play and have a wonderful time and move all of their parts." And so, for the first time, girls were dressed differently from their adult counterparts -- in a simple chemise with a sash.

As the Victorian age crept in, there was a stiffening of everybody's clothing, but girls and women remained sartorially distinct. "It was very, very important that the girls wore short dresses and the ladies wore long dresses," says Hollander. "Girls wore their hair down in curls or braids and put their hair up at the time they got long dresses -- whenever they were supposed to be marriageable. The idea was that children are innocent. They don't have any sexuality, so don't worry."

What we're seeing now, she says, is a reversion to pre-Enlightenment days, a time before children were innocent, when they were nothing but smaller versions of ourselves in every way. "We are back in the 17th century," she says. "We're dressing little kids like adults and adults are dressing like little children. There is no distinction once again. A girl is a woman by the time she's 8 and a woman remains a girl until she's 80."

For many parents, there's nothing wrong with this. Kids are always trying to be more like teenagers, and the precocious fashions are kind of sweet and funny in the way those Anne Geddes photos of kids kissing are. "There is a mistaken sense that kids don't get the joke or the meaning so it's okay for them to wear sexualized slogans," says Susan Linn, an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a co-founder of the coalition Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.

But even for parents who do have a problem with these off-the-rack identities, there is tremendous pressure to buy in. For one thing, they are susceptible to the "everyone is doing it" argument, and they don't want their kid to be ostracized. For another, it's often the least of their concerns. "They are in the middle of numerous commercially created battles with their children," says Linn. "Battles about junk food, violent media, expensive brands and all sorts of things. It's hard, if not impossible, to say no all of the time."

The popular marketing spin -- which, incidentally, is supposed to reassure parents in some way - is that it is *kids* who are "getting older younger," a theory called age compression, brought on by the fact that young people have never had access to so much information. But what we're really seeing, says Linn, is marketers exploiting the natural tendency of young girls to want to emulate older girls, who appear to them to have more independence and social prestige.

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In the end, then, it's not really a kid problem, but a grown-up problem. Because girls, looking the way they look, are only aping grown women, which serves to remind us of the turmoil and confusion surrounding what we currently believe a woman should be. The New York-based writer Ariel Levy documented this phenomenon, which she dubbed "raunch culture," in her 2006 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*. The idea is that, in a post-feminist universe, a woman can be the agent of her own objectification and still be empowered. And so we see a boom in trends inspired by porn culture: pole-dancing and striptease lessons, boob jobs and Brazilian waxes. "A tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular," writes Levy. "What we once regarded as a kind of sexual expression, we now view as sexuality." More recently, the *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert, inspired by an Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirt he came across that read *Who Needs A Brain When I Have These?*, addressed what he calls a "disrespectful, degrading, contemptuous treatment of women" that has become "so pervasive and so mainstream that it has just about lost its ability to shock."

"This is some sort of response to the feminist movement," says Hollander. In fact, it's part of a trial-and-error continuum. In the '70s, as women prepared to invade the workplace en masse, the most overt manifestation of this new societal phase was sartorial. "It meant throwing out the skirts and certainly girdles and dressing so that you couldn't tell the difference between a man and a woman, except very small things," she says. "The masculine wardrobe was entirely co-opted by women. Suits and shoulder pads denied curves. Breasts and behinds and hips were not in fashion."

The current hyper-feminine aesthetic, one could argue, is an over-correction of this correction -- an almost fanatical reclaiming of pink and frilly. But what may have been born of a spirit of defiance has lost its revolutionary edge, and now young girls are learning the not-so-progressive lesson that their primary value lies in their worth as sex objects. "Just because we are post doesn't mean we are feminists," writes Levy. "There is a widespread assumption that simply because my generation of women has the good fortune to live in a world touched by the feminist movement, that means everything we do is magically imbued with its agenda."

The trickle-down effect we're now seeing among very young girls has resulted in a Junior Miss version of raunch culture. Watching kids adopt these same behaviours is like looking at the larger culture through a fun-house mirror. On the body of a six-year-old, the diminishing aspect of an *Eye Candy* T-shirt is amplified and twisted -- and entirely devoid of any of the irony that makes it pseudo-radical coming from a twentysomething pop star. "The problem is that girls are acquiring the trappings of maturity," Linn says, "but there's no indication that their social or emotional development is keeping pace." In fact, the aspiring-up trend preys upon and heightens the particular insecurities of kids in this age group. "Will she be popular? Will she be invited somewhere? With what group does she belong?" write Brown and Lamb. "Before a girl has half a chance to reflect on issues of belonging and desirability, she is being confronted with a market that tells her she should be concerned about this -- even when she's as young as 8."

We tell girls that, in wearing these things, they are somehow expressing themselves in an essential way. "If Ts expressed who a girl is," write Brown and Sharon Lamb, "you'd think she'd be wearing the T she got at the summer camp she went to, the music festival she attended or the Humane Society where she volunteers to walk the dogs. But instead they express 'attitude' rather than interests,

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skills, concerns, and hobbies." Worse still, in their very construction, these clothes prescribe behaviours that are hard to describe as empowering. A micro-mini, for instance, is a great disincentive to playing on the monkey bars. A halter top and tight, low-rise jeans make it rather more challenging to run and jump. "Every message to a preteen girl," write Brown and Lamb, "says that it's preferable to pose on the beach rather than surf, to shop rather than play, to decorate rather than invent."

But for marketers, it's not about grooming girls to be the next generation's cast of *Girls Gone Wild*. It has much more to do with grooming them to be promiscuous consumers. "Marketers are not setting out to sexualize little girls," says Susan Linn. "They are setting out to make a profit selling clothes to and for children and don't care what the consequences are." Girls themselves don't necessarily understand the clothing as sexual, she says, but "what they do comprehend is that they get a lot of attention by dressing in a particular way."

Female power has always been inextricably linked to ornamentation. When a woman comes of age, the convention is that she takes on a series of external cues to indicate sexual readiness: bright red lips that signal arousal, high heels that show off shapely legs, clothing that hugs fertile curves. This is what it means to be a sophisticated, mature and, to some extent, a powerful woman. But these things no longer correspond to any sort of biological turning point. Instead, they signify a claiming of personal economic autonomy. Call it consumer readiness. And as far as marketers are concerned, girls are never too young to be ready.

In fact, the most important identity of all for girls to cultivate is their identity as shoppers. For example, the educational toy brand International Playthings has a product called My First Purse, marketed to girls two years old and up. It's pink, purple and plush, and it includes play accessories, among them a wallet, debit card, lipstick, keys, mirror, and cellphone. (No, they don't make oversized baby-blue billfolds for boys to wedge in the back of their diapers.) Likewise, Mattel's Barbie Bank-with-ME ATM machine for girls 3 and up that takes bills and coins and displays their balance on the screen. The debit card activates sound effects and banking commands from Barbie. Anyone for a game of "Transfer funds"?

Ultimately, it is the "play" aspect of aspirational products that seems to have evaporated. Young girls have always loved to play dress-up -- to trip around the house in their mother's heels and pearls. Playing mom, playing house, playing glamour girl or doctor was about little girls creating safe spaces for themselves in which to experiment with grown-up female identities. The difference is you can turn play off. Play time is confined and varied. Whereas now, taking on a womanly identity is incorporated into girls' everyday lives. They don't see it as a pretend purse, it's *their* purse. Wearing a halter top is not for dress-up, it's for show. "There's a seriousness to it that there wasn't," says Brown. "Now, it's really not about fantasy play. It's about adopting something that's out there for them. It's like practice for something very specific, to be like Jessica Simpson."

The latest dolls for girls offer not-so-subtle reinforcement of the same ideas. Twenty years ago, popular collections including Cabbage Patch Kids and Strawberry Shortcake had big floppy hats, pudgy limbs, and silly clothing. They were cartoonish -- with bright colours and scents created to appeal to kids' imaginations. In 2001, MGA Entertainment launched the Bratz dolls with the tag line: "The girls with a passion for fashion." These toys, says Linn, are a "ratcheted up male fantasy of what women should look

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like -- big eyes, big lips, big breasts, an anorexic waistline and very long legs." Soon, the Bratz dolls -- who do nothing but shop and socialize -- were outselling even Barbie, grossing roughly US\$2 billion per year. Mattel fought back with a sluttier, more urban line of Barbie dolls called the My Scene collection. "That kind of plastic sexuality seems to be normalized for younger and younger kids," says Linn. We used to worry about Barbie, with her improbable proportions and dismal math skills. Now we long for Barbie. Not the new Bling Bling Barbie, but the old one with the job. At least she *tried* to do math.

It is no coincidence that the Lolita moment is surfacing now, at a time when boys are supposedly in crisis, says Brown. "Twenty years ago, we were talking about girls and loss of voice and self-esteem and there were all these empowerment programs," says Brown. "Now we have girls and women more likely to go to college, getting better grades, being really out there and claiming more power. What women are doing is challenging the status quo, and when that happens, things tighten up. It's an anxiety, a collective response."

And so, while adults try to navigate all of these complicated, fragmented ideals about gender, childhood, empowerment and sexuality, girls have become our ideological guinea pigs. And they're being taught some pretty unappealing lessons. "You can learn a whole lot of very serious narcissism by being brought up to be looked at constantly," says Hollander. "That was Marie Antoinette's upbringing, who was scheduled to be the queen of France since she was born." And we all know how that one turned out.

Unless we are prepared to see six-year-olds in garters, then it would seem we're ready for another backlash. Already, the boundaries of what the public will put up with are beginning to constrict. Religious and family groups, media critics, feminists and other concerned citizens have teamed up to halt production of certain products deemed too outrageous -- including a line of Bratz bras for little girls, and a line of Hasbro dolls aimed at six-year-olds based on the Pussycat Dolls, a burlesque troupe turned singing group. Now, advocacy groups have their sights set on a new line of clothing for babies called Pimpfants. "It's a kid thang," the company's slogan says. But when you see a six-month-old child in a *M.I.L.F.* onesie, even the most permissive grown-up has to stop and ask herself, whom is this really about?

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QUESTIONS

1. In a short paragraph summarize the argument that the author is making and the point he is trying to persuade her audience to follow.
2. List the persuasive techniques that Lianne George uses in her essay.
3. Are there any arguments or techniques that Lianne George uses that are weak or unclear, which many weaken the overall impact of her point?
4. Describe the tone that George uses in her essay. In your opinion, is it appropriate for the audience?
5. Explain the overall effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of this essay. Does it make a valid point – and if so, how?
6. Reflect on the essay in a short paragraph by describing your own thoughts about this issue. Has the essay affected your thoughts on the subject in any way?