

# Here's why I won't be shopping at American Apparel this Christmas.

By **Brinsley Dresden**

How do you name and shame the shameless? That's a real dilemma for the Advertising Standards Authority, because every so often an advertiser comes along who decides not just to flout the self regulatory system, not just to stick two fingers up at it, but to deliberately exploit it in order to court controversy and gain cheap publicity, regardless of the social consequences.

The latest in this line of rogue advertisers is American Apparel, purveyors of casual clothing of no particular distinction. Last week (14th December 2012), for the fourth time this year, and for the second consecutive week, it has had a complaint against its advertising upheld by the ASA. And once again, this involves the use of imagery that sexualises young women and girls. This week, the image in question is of a girl who looks like a teenager below the age of consent, shot with her knees drawn up so that you can see her knickers and her crotch. Reputable media outlets reporting this story are only using cropped version of the image. I've seen the entire image and I could republish it here. But I am not going to. I find it deeply offensive and I believe others will too, so I will not give it further exposure.

Both American Apparel and Vice Magazine, who published the advert, denied that there was anything wrong with it, arguing that the model was over 18 and fully clothed. Indeed, they argued that she was wearing rather more clothes than the women in a typical lingerie advert. That would be a clever argument but for the fact it completely misses the point: the issue is about the apparent age of the model, the angle from which she has been shot and the media placement in a magazine with a worldwide adult readership. It's not about the extent of her undress. She may or may not be over 18, but only a gullible fool would believe that she was not shot to look under 16. The benefit of any remaining doubt must surely be extinguished by the long track record of complaints against American Apparel on both sides of the Atlantic.

The earlier ASA complaints dealt with similar issues each time: either the sexualisation of young girls or the use of unnecessarily sexualised images of women in the context of adverts for clothes. And if you do a bit online research into the history of American Apparel's advertising, you'll see that the deliberate use of inappropriate and deeply distasteful imagery is a long established concern in the United States too.

Unfortunately, American Apparel seems to be adept at exploiting certain loopholes in the self-regulatory system in order to get away with this abusive behaviour. Apparently, they do not use an advertising agency, so there is no pressure that can be brought to bear by the IPA. It would appear that the magazines which supply the paid for media are not part of a trade association, so the ASA cannot demand that they only publish adverts that have been pre-cleared by CAP Copy Advice. And now, with the extension of the ASA's remit to the content of advertisers' own websites, American Apparel can simply and cynically use its website as a platform to get the

column inches and publicity it craves when ASA adjudications are published. The usual escalation measure that the ASA would apply to recidivist publishers of misleading advertising, a referral to the Office of Fair Trading, does not apply to issues of taste and decency. The result is that American Apparel is free to use images which seek to shock and offend for the sake of a quick Buck.

American Apparel is obviously a devotee to the old adage that all publicity is good publicity. But things are not so black and white. It is becoming increasingly apparent that negative publicity about lawful, but distasteful, corporate behaviour can trigger consumer boycotts that can force changes to that behaviour. Think tax; think Starbucks.

Of course, American Apparel is not the only advertiser to use shock tactics, which have been successfully and legitimately exploited by other advertisers for many years. Benetton, another fashion brand, has used them to make points about significant social issues such as human rights and civil liberties. But American Apparel are not trying to make a political point – unless it is an extreme, libertarian one – they are simply trying to shock, to gain publicity and to make money. For all reasonable people, the sexualisation of children remains rightly taboo, so American Apparel are also damaging the credibility of the self-regulatory system, as well as potentially causing serious harm to children.

So this Christmas, I shall be making my own personal gesture against the gratuitous use of sexualised images of young girls in advertising by embarking on my own personal boycott of American Apparel. I don't suppose that will cause too many sleepless nights back at the corporate HQ, but perhaps if enough people do the same, it just might.

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