

CASE VIII-D**Calvin Klein's Kiddie Porn Ads Prick Our Tolerance**

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As if a pantyless Brook Shields cooing "Nothing comes between me and my Calvins" weren't enough. As if displaying a nipple to sell millions of dollars of Obsession perfume wasn't pushing tolerance to its edge, Calvin Klein pressed further. His 1996 television and magazine advertisements showing young people posed in provocative positions had some critics calling them common child pornography and prompted an FBI investigation.

"It was the portrayal of youth that was part of people's rage," said Katie Ford, chief executive of Ford Models Inc. in a *Wall Street Journal* article. "I think obviously a line was crossed because it created such an uproar. That's not a personal opinion, but it seems to be America's opinion."

The ads were shot in an environment right out of a cheap back room or basement. The print ads feature unknowns such as Delancey Berzin, a fourteen-year-old male, who was paid \$1,000 to pose topless in Calvin Klein jeans, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. One male model unbuttoned his pants to reveal his underwear, looking as if he were in the midst of undress. Another young man is stripping off his shirt while looking vulnerable, and yet another photograph shows a young woman, lying spread-eagled on a bench with her denim miniskirt yoked up and revealing her underwear-covered crotch. She wears an innocent expression while she teases a piece of hair.

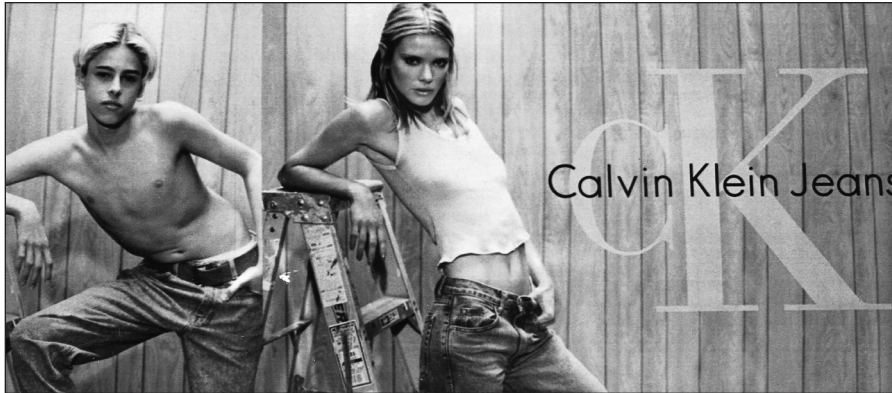
The sleazy effect was intentional. The \$6 million campaign was shot by Stephen Meisel, who built his career on photographing seductive greats, such as Madonna in her 1992 book *Sex*.

Klein did get one thing out of the campaign: free publicity. *Washington Post* columnist Bob Garfield described it best: Klein releases his ads and "lobs them into the firetrap of the media culture. The ladder trucks and pumpers of journalism race to the scene, bystanders run to see what the commotion is about and, as they stand in their nightclothes gawking, appalled but somehow also titillated by the conflagration, Klein strolls by and sells them \$100 million worth of pants."

Klein said placing the kiddie porn stigma on his clothes was not his intention. In a full-page *New York Times* advertisement, Klein said the ads' message was intended to show "that young people of today, the most media savvy yet, have a real strength of character and independence. They have a strong defined line of what they will and will not do."

The campaign was withdrawn in August 1996 after a public outcry. The main force behind the dissent was the Rev. Donald Wildmon, founder of the conservative American Family Association (AFA). He urged retailers to boycott the ads and threatened to have AFA members picket stores if they didn't comply.

Perhaps one of the problems in pushing public taste is that Klein used young males in these exploitive roles. In the ads that ran on MTV, an older male voice asked



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS.

youthful-looking men, “You got a real nice look. How old are you?” “You think you could rip that shirt off you?” and “That’s a nice body . . . do you work out?”

Society has long accepted the use of young women in this role, but boys are still off-limits. “To get sexy little guys gazing moistly at the camera, that gives everyone a terrible shock because boys are not to be used in this way,” said Anne Hollander, author of *Sex and Suits*, in a *Washington Post* article.

Yet minor-aged models who do seductive shoots do so willingly. Model Rainer Hammer, fifteen, who wants to pose for Klein and has already been photographed by Meisel, is typical of the would-be models. She built up a portfolio of pictures of her in shackles and underwear. She has posed with a boy in a bed for Replay jeans. Wearing jeans, he lay on top of her and slightly lifted up her white undershirt. “I know the models in the Calvin Klein ads, and they don’t care,” she told the *Wall Street Journal*. “To us it’s acting.”

Micro Issues:

1. Do the ads described meet your definition of kiddie porn?
2. Do the ads described meet your definition of bad taste?

Mid-range Issues:

1. Has Klein been able to manipulate the media with his shocking commercials?
Is it possible that free publicity was the intent of this modest-budget ad campaign?

2. What should be the proper media response to those who use shock tactics to try to garner publicity?

Macro Issues:

1. How do you respond to the claim that the commercials were shocking because boys were placed in vulnerable positions? Would the commercial have generated as much publicity if all the models had been female?
2. These commercials were accepted by major media outlets. What duty does a medium have to reflect the mores of the culture in which it operates?