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Trophy Children Don’t Smile: Fashion Advertisements For Designer Children’s Clothing In Cookie Magazine

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TROPHY CHILDREN DON’T SMILE: FASHION ADVERTISEMENTS FOR DESIGNER CHILDREN’S CLOTHING IN COOKIE MAGAZINE

A Thesis Presented

by

CHRIS BOULTON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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TROPHY CHILDREN DON’T SMILE: FASHION ADVERTISEMENTS FOR DESIGNER CHILDREN’S CLOTHING IN COOKIE MAGAZINE

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Michael Morgan, Department Chair
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DEDICATION

To Clay Steinman, who taught me that media studies could do more than just cultivate better taste, it could change the menu.

To mothers everywhere who, having grown up in a sexist society, now work to create equal opportunity for generations to come.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would have never seen the light of day if not for the support and guidance of my colleagues, friends, and family. First off, I am grateful for my parents’ constant encouragement and occasional proof-reading. My girlfriend, Jennifer Seavey, helped bring balance to my life and doused more fires than I can count. Erica Scharrer was an early advocate of this idea, encouraging me to theorize a media literacy for adults. And, finally, my adviser Emily West was a steady and thoughtful editorial hand throughout, protecting me from my own foibles and teasing out the very best in my analysis.
ABSTRACT

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FEBRUARY 2007

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This study examines print advertising from Cookie, an up-scale American parenting magazine for affluent mothers. The ads include seven designer clothing brands: Rocawear, Baby Phat, Ralph Lauren, Diesel, Kenneth Cole, Sean John, and DKNY. When considered within the context of their adult equivalents, the ads for the children’s lines often created a prolepsis—or flash-forward—by depicting the child model as a nascent adult. This was accomplished in three ways. First, the children’s ads typically contained structural continuities such as logo, set design, and color scheme that helped reinforce their relationship with the adult brand. Second, most of the ads place the camera at eye-level—a framing that allows the child models to address their adult viewers as equals. Finally, almost half of the ads feature at least one child looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. This is significant because, in Western culture, the withholding of a smile is a sign of dominance typically reserved for adult males. When children mimic this familiar and powerful “look,” they convey a sense of adult-like confidence and self-awareness often associated with precocious sexuality.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Taboos are badly kept secrets.  
(Holland, 2004, p. xiii)

In the early 1980’s, childhood was under attack. A small army of authors sounded the alarm: children were being pushed into adulthood by the mass media (Elkind, 1981; Postman, 1982; Winn, 1977). Twenty years later, most academics writing on the subject continue to bemoan the loss of childhood as we once knew it (Hymowitz, 2001; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004). Many object that young girls, in particular, are targeted and victimized by advertisements featuring impossibly thin models (Cortese, 1999; Kilbourne, 2000; Levin, 2005). ¹ These ads, the argument goes, encourage girls to grow up too fast, hate their bodies, and become sexually promiscuous at an ever-earlier age. Despite the protests, marketers continue to embrace young consumers. Direct-marketing to children has grown to $15 Billion per year and the “nag factor” of children influencing their parents’ purchasing decisions is estimated to be worth $600 billion/year (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004). Add to this bountiful treasure the equally tempting prospect of ‘cradle-to-grave’ brand loyalty, and the race to the bottom of the age-bracket seems not only imminent, but inevitable. Moreover, much has been written on the negative impact of marketing to children, but there is a curious gap in the literature concerning marketing to adults through children.

¹ For an alternative view, see Jenkins (1998).
The study that follows considers the “adultification” of children by taking a closer look at print advertisements for designer children’s clothing. I will argue that these ads contract child models as sign-vehicles designed to move adults to action through visual persuasion. This is not an audience study, but rather a textual analysis of ads from Cookie, an up-scale parenting magazine aimed at adults or, more specifically, affluent mothers (“Cookie circulation,” December 4, 2006). I examined a particular subset of these images and found that the ads not only implicate adults by inviting their gaze, but also convey “adultness” by evoking existing visual conventions. This chapter will provide an overview of three areas: the existing literature on childhood as a cultural construct, various theories on gender and sexuality, and, finally, a preview of the chapters to come. But first, I would like to address what is at stake when we decide to take ads seriously.

Why do ads matter?

Observers and critics of visual culture often face incredulity or even downright hostility towards their craft. “Why study advertisements?” a skeptic might ask. “Aren’t there more pressing social problems in the world? Besides, it’s only an ad. It’s not like I’m being forced to buy the product.” At first blush, these objections may seem reasonable, but they are perched upon a set of wobbling assumptions about accuracy, intent, and the “bad apple” theory. I will now address each of these fallacies in turn.

One might argue that, since ads are designed to promote products, they should be judged solely on the **accuracy** of their claims. But this fails to account for how a

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2 According to Cookie’s Circulation/Demographics report, the magazine targets women age 25-34 with household incomes of $75,000 or above and children age 0-9. They estimate their actual readership to be 84% female, 79% parents, and 58% people with household incomes over $75,000. The average reader is believed to be 36 years old. (“Cookie Circulation,” December 4, 2006).
fashion ad featuring super-waif Kate Moss is less a rational argument than a symbolic association. Indeed, Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) argue that, over the course of the 20th century, American culture has witnessed the growing dominance of visual advertisements that avoid claims about a product’s efficacy in favor of simply depicting the people, places, and things associated with the product (pp. 153-159). The new sales pitch seems to say, “Buy this product to experience this lifestyle.” Some critics, like Williams (1980), have tried to burst this bubble by revealing the magician’s tricks. “It’s just an illusion,” they say. “Calvin Klein Jeans are not Kate Moss, they’re just cloth.” While it is certainly important to recognize that marketers inflate the purchase price of a product beyond its material value, such a cold-eyed view of commerce ignores how we imbue certain commodities with emotional significance (Jhally, 1990). Whether an heirloom steeped in nostalgia, a chic perfume, or a coveted football jersey, material goods and their associated brands can carry meaning that transcends, and often far exceeds, the sum of their parts. To wit, this process of expressing ourselves through commodities is a cultural practice constantly reinforced by a series of social incentives (Belk, 1998). Thus, many attempts to “prove” that an ad is false actually miss the point, like trying to catch air with a net. For, as Berger (1977) notes, “the truthfulness of publicity is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer” (p. 146). The appeal of an ad, then, is based not on some sort of empirical reality, but more abstract dreams and aspirations. For example, if a child is teased for wearing the wrong clothing, at issue would not be improper material, but the wrong message of the style and/or brand. Moreover, despite

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3 We are often rewarded for having good taste in material goods. Bourdieu (1984) has even argued that we express our social status through what we consume. I discuss his argument at greater length in the
the artificial mythologies constructed by advertising, there remain an all-too-real set of consequences for our purchasing decisions and brand affiliations.

A second misconception assumes that, in order to negatively affect the larger culture, advertising campaigns must intend to do harm. For example, this would require that fashion designers not be content with merely selling clothes, but also be dead-set on promoting eating disorders among young girls. Since such far-fetched scenarios are easily dismissed as paranoid delusions, ads must therefore be trivial, disparate, and not worthy of serious study. But there are two problems here. First, this argument is based on a false dilemma: since ads are either selling clothing or sending negative messages, they can’t do both. Once recognized, this fallacy is easily exposed and refuted. Positives and negatives do, in fact, co-exist and often emanate from the same source: a car can both provide transportation and pollute the environment, a steak can both provide protein and clog arteries, and clothing companies can sell their products at the expense of their customers’ self-esteem. Clearly, negative outcomes can accompany positive pursuits. In other words, most benefits come with a cost. Which brings us to the second problem. As Jhally (1987) argues, advertisements need not be malicious in order to be pernicious. In spite of their individual claims that competing for our attention, most ads mutually reinforce each other through the manufacture of desire—an ideology that, when considered at the systemic level, underpins the fundamental premise of capitalism: emotional fulfillment through the consumption of material goods. For example, though the producers of the Kate Moss fashion ad mentioned above may not intend to damage the body-image and self-esteem of young girls, their message will join the following chapter, “Theories of Consumption.”
a resounding chorus that condemns most body sizes as inadequate while declaring skinny as the gold standard.

Finally, we have the fallacy of the “bad apple.” This is the skeptic’s last stand. For even we allow that 1) ads do create a mythology that transcends the “accuracy” of their claims and 2) sometimes have harmful, if unintentional, effects on society, some may argue that critics of advertising nonetheless make much ado about nothing by cherry-picking only the most egregious examples which do not represent the whole. In this conception, advertising is largely innocuous and the occasional “bad apple” is simply the cost of doing business in a free and open society. There is a grain of truth here. Even the most offensive individual ad would be hard-pressed to single-handedly create lasting harm in a viewer. And it is certainly true that many academics are drawn to analyze only the most shocking commercial images. But the problem with the “bad apple” theory is that ads are not experienced in isolation from one another. On the contrary, they contribute to a system of commercial images that, as a part of social reality, have a cumulative effect (Jhally, 1987, pp. 135-139). For example, one “bad apple” featuring an anorexic fashion model would join an entire orchard of similar ads. Though the particular varieties may vary, the single, central message remains the same: you are inadequate and our product will complete you (Berger, 1977, pp. 131-142). In other words, a Cindy Crawford body-type may seem relatively healthy when compared to Kate Moss, but both spokesmodels offer equally improbable outcomes for their viewers. In this way, even the “baddest” apple is no orange—it is still the same fruit deemed rotten only because its once familiar message is now overripe. Thus, “bad apple” advertisements are not merely eccentric outliers or exceptions to the rule. They
are pungent forms of communication that can help us understand the unspoken consensus of the majority—advertising’s central message of inadequacy.

**Childhood: A Moving Target**

Despite the general dearth of scholarship on marketing *through* children, a few notable studies have come forth. Alexander (1994), in her examination of magazine advertisements from 1905 to 1990, argues that American popular culture experienced “a shift from images of the child as a factor of production—as an economic contributor to the family—to images of the child as a consumption good—as an element of the good life” (p. 756). She chronicles how, over the course of the twentieth century, ads went from depicting children as helpful workers around the house (akin to Santa’s elves) to precious (and useless) love objects adorned for public display. She attributes the trend to the emergence of a child-centered culture, accelerated by the coincidence of the post WWII baby boom and the permissive parenting style promoted by Dr. Benjamin Spock in the 1950’s. Alexander contends that, particularly in this era, “luxury goods, such as houses and cars, are photographed together with children and offered to the viewer an idealized picture of the most enjoyable way to live” (p. 757).

Like Alexander, Cook (2004) uses a historical approach to connect images of childhood to American consumer culture. He describes how, unlike today, most merchandisers in the early twentieth century stocked children's clothing alongside similar adult garments. Cook argues that the Great Depression drove retailers to invent new consumer categories in a desperate attempt to generate more revenue. For example, in the 1930’s, department stores began rearranging floor plans to create special sections for children, dividing the clothing by age and gender rather than type. Celebrity
endorsements from such child stars as Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney helped drive sales and Shirley Temple’s retail line further legitimized the newly created ‘toddler’ concept as a viable merchandising category. Though not a study of advertisements per se, Cook’s work suggests that cultural notions of childhood have long been shaped by mass marketing. More importantly, his work helps put more recent advertising campaigns in historical perspective: children’s clothing may be coming full circle. Once positioned as a distinct market segment, designer children’s clothing seem to be reclaiming its rightful place in the adult section.

Taking an even longer view, Higonnet (1998) traces images of children back to the eighteenth century when painters moved from depicting “faulty small adults” who were “born in sin” to illustrating children as “blank slates” of purity, the Romantic ideal of the Enlightenment (p. 8). According to Higonnet, this romantic reinvention of childhood was negatively defined: a child, innocent on all counts of crimes such as shame and sexuality, was, in essence, not an adult (p. 224). She argues that society’s cherished conception of childhood is undergoing another dramatic, and uncomfortable, transition. The pendulum is swinging back with the accelerated circulation of images depicting a “knowing child” whose self-awareness challenges the binary oppositions of the romantic ideal and, consequently, aggravates long-established taboos (p. 207). Cross (2004) concurs, adding that the symbolic change from pure and innocent to cool and jaded comes at an ever-earlier age (p. 17). And Hymowitz (2001) neatly sums up the zeitgeist:

4 Anne Hollander (1994) describes the old romantic custom of emphasizing purity and innocence through contrast. By dressing their little angels in “diminutive versions of rough gear” such as pirates, Turks, Romans, or soldiers, parents “costumed their children in garb that had been highly menacing in its original form, but that clearly denoted harmless play when sported by innocents under ten” (p. 172).
Giving new meaning to the phrase hard sell, today's ads demonstrate for children the tough posture of the sophisticated child who is savvy to the current styles and fashions...Forget about what Freud called latency, a period of sexual quiescence and naiveté; forget about what every parent encounters on a daily basis—artlessness, shyness, giggling jokes, cluelessness. These media kids have it all figured out, and they know how to project the look that says they do. (p. 13)

Perhaps the most notable commentator on children and popular imagery, Holland (1986; 2004) takes a more philosophical approach. She argues that childhood constitutes a complicated, controversial, and contested terrain. And yet, its visual representation is constantly harvested and distributed by marketers hoping to sell products to adults. According to Holland, childhood tends to be defined by those who’ve just left it. Indeed, for some, it is a distant and nostalgic memory. The concept, then, is not based on the lived experiences of flesh and blood children, but rather the projected fantasies of how adults believe they once were and how children should be now (p. xi). Like Higonnet (1998), Holland (1986; 2004) argues that childhood seems most resonant when posed in stark contrast to the failures of adulthood. Holland’s central point is that the dominant image of childhood remains fluid, at one moment closer to nature, at another more civilized. James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) concur, arguing that childhood should not be biologically defined but rather “understood as a social or cultural construction...it cannot be ‘read off’ from the biological differences between adults and children such as physical size or sexual maturity” (p. 146). What is left, then, is a convenient binary opposition:

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Gottfried (1994) also examines advertising’s wistful depictions of children. Echoing Berger (1977), Gottfried argues that these ads are not so much mirrors of society, as crystal balls depicting both a rarified past and a dreamy future, available through the purchase of the appropriate product. Moog (1990) chronicles the advertising industry’s eager adoption of baby models to catch the attention of adults. She quotes Jack Mariucci, executive creative director at advertising agency DDB Needham, describing his
A child is considered to be everything an adult is not, an adult everything the child is not. The two categories oppose and exclude each other, and so define each other. Neither makes sense without the other…When our society allocates characteristics between the two mutually exclusive categories, adult and child, sexuality is put firmly into the adult department. It belongs so strongly to the category of adult that it is often thought of as its defining quality. (Holland, 2004, pp. 45-47)

It would appear that an “adult” is ultimately defined as a sexual being. Conversely, the naiveté of inexpereience keeps children comparatively pure. For what it lacks in subtlety, this cultural system makes up for in clarity: the line in the sand is deep and wide. But a problem arises when “innocent” children are visually depicted as “knowing” adults. I will argue that such images are not merely cute and harmless, they are representations of “adultification.” And, since adulthood is often distinguished by its exclusive access to sexuality, these images lay the foundation for the sexualization of children. Furthermore, in a patriarchal society, this very public tightrope is disproportionately traversed by young girls. As Holland (2004) argues, print advertisements for designer children’s clothing operate within a gender system in which an “awareness of adult womanhood is present in girl children” and thus “the distinction between child and adult is much less clear for females than for males” (p. 51). It would seem that, in some instances, the line separating childhood and adulthood exists to be crossed.

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famous Michelin campaign. According to Mariucci, the baby in the ad symbolizes, for the intended adult consumer, “the purest part of yourself—you are that child and that is riding on your tires” (p. 171).

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Many contest this notion. Echoing James, Jenks, and Prout (1998), Blaine (1999) argues that the popular conception of an asexual childhood is a “fundamental cultural myth” (p. 51).
Figure 1: Original Coppertone Ad (Public Domain)

**Woman/Child**

The precocious girl, mature beyond her years, is a familiar figure in mass media. Like a modern-day Eve considering the apple, she is continually knocking at the door of carnal knowledge. Take Lolita, the infamous preadolescent nymphet of Vladimir Nabakov’s celebrated and controversial novel. For Merskin (2004), the Lolita “look” continues to gain purchase in the culture, epitomized in the Abercrombie & Fitch thong underwear marketed to 10-year-olds and emblazoned with words like “eye candy” and
“wink wink” (Linn, 2004, p. 143). Holland (2004) describes how adult modeling agencies get ahead by recruiting young blood. For example, at age three, Jody Foster got her big break when she was cast as the “Coppertone Girl” in the company’s first television ad for sunscreen. Ten years later, she would be cast as the child prostitute in Taxi Driver (1976). Like Foster, Brooke Shields grew up in the public eye and was promoted from the role of child model to prostitute, this time at age 12, for the film Pretty Baby (1978). Three years later, Shields would star in a soft porn return to Eden, The Blue Lagoon (1980). That same year, Shields posed for a series of television ads for Calvin Klein Jeans ironically entitled “The Feminist.” Writhing around in skin-tight jeans, the fifteen year-old Shields purred into the camera, “Know what comes between me and my Calvin’s? Nothing.” (Dietz, 1999, p. 145) Shield’s teasing double entendre belies an awareness of her own allure, just as the “Coppertone Girl” blushes when her bottom is bared, yet makes no effort to cover up (see Figure 1). Thus, JonBenet Ramsey is only the most recent example of girls performing, in public, as women.

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7 Joyce Ballantyne Brand, the pin-up artist who used her own daughter as the model for the original Coppertone Girl, explains her technique: “The trick is to make a pinup flirtatious, but you don't do dirty. You want the girl to look a little like your sister, or maybe your girlfriend, or just the girl next door. She's a nice girl, she's innocent, but maybe she got caught in an awkward situation that's a little sexy.” (Klinkenberg, 2005, p. 1)

8 The Coppertone logo originated in the 1950’s, featuring a Shirley-Temple-like girl with blonde pigtails who appears to be around five-years-old. Her blue swim suit is being pulled off by a black dog, revealing a dramatic tan line. She looks over her shoulder, presses a finger to her mouth, yet makes no attempt to conceal her exposed buttocks. The logo merits more detailed analysis that I am unable to pursue here. Suffice it to say, Coppertone has since “cleaned up” its image: the new version hikes up the suit and lightens the skin such that there is no tan line at all—effectively erasing the original conceit for the ad.

9 In 1996, JonBenet Ramsey, the six-year-old beauty pageant queen, was found murdered in her parent’s home. Her death triggered a backlash against pageants that paraded small children wearing full make-up, high heels etc. in front of an audience of adults. Nevertheless, Giroux (2000), Blaine (1999), and Levin (2005) have argued that the public’s obsession with the case, and the wide circulation of JonBenet’s glamour shots, symbolizes a larger trend of hyper-sexualization in the imagery of children in general, and girls in particular. Moreover, despite the apparent uproar, child modeling is not going away any time
As Holland (2004) points out, images that dress girls in the guise of mature females are powerful because they can have their cake and eat it too: pure can be sexy; a virgin can be a temptress; and Eve can wear a fig leaf even before her fall into shame:

The image of the child-woman balances that of the too-knowing child. In the first case, seductiveness seems an innocent condition of a woman’s being which she does not choose and cannot reject; in the second, seductiveness may be consciously displayed but its consummation is tabooed. (p. 194)

Kilbourne (2000) adds that this phenomenon traps women in an impossible position: they must be at once innocent and seductive. Thus, for Kilbourne, the virgin/whore split is “the central contradiction of the culture” which may help to explain the public’s obsession with each year’s new crop of fresh prospects (p. 145). To wit, Kate Moss was plucked from obscurity at age 14 and posing nude by 16. At 18, she was the face of Calvin Klein’s Obsession perfume and the catalyst behind the heroin chic of the early 1990’s (Conrad, 2005). With her wispy figure and gaunt face, Moss, seemed to understand the source of her appeal when, at age twenty, she observed that she looked like she was twelve years old (ibid.). For his part, Klein concurred, gushing that Moss “had this childlike, womanlike thing - a kind of sexiness that I think is very exciting” (ibid.). And so, whether it’s Brooke Shields as “America’s most celebrated symbolic virgin” (Dietz, 1999, p. 145), a young Jody Foster turning tricks, or JonBenet acting well beyond her age, it would appear that Lolita is alive and well in American visual culture.

soon. Indeed, as a child talent agent indelicately put it, “As long as there are JonBenet Ramseys, there’s going to be a need for a child to play JonBenet in the TV movie” (Adler, 1997, p. 2).

Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that Klein sought to duplicate Kate Moss’ body type and facial structure in selecting her replacement for the new Obsession perfume campaign: seventeen-year-old Gemma Ward. So young is her look that Ward was recently photographed for a Vogue fashion spread entitled “Like a Virgin” (Testino, 2005).
Thus far we have considered how young girls are dressed up to appear more grown up, but Goffman (1979) has studied the inversion of this equation: namely grown women dressing and posing to appear more child-like. He outlines five prominent gender patterns in print advertisements. One of them, the ritualization of subordination, describes how woman are often depicted as prostrate and physically vulnerable to attack: perhaps lying on a bed, lounging on a couch, or even sprawled on the floor. Men, in contrast, tend to be shown as standing upright and alert. In sum, men tower above women, often holding them safely under their wing. This, in turn, sets up another pattern: licensed withdrawal. Women often drift, space-out, and close their eyes—entrusting their own safety to an ever-vigilant male protector. A third pattern, and natural extension of the previous two, is infantilization. Goffman arrives at a discomforting conclusion: when in the presence of a male, women are typically displayed as sweet, gentle, passive, carefree…children (p. 5). Thus, when it comes to defining the boundaries of childhood, gender is key:

There is a tendency for women to be pictured as more akin to their daughters (and to themselves in younger years) than is the case with men. Boys, as it were, have to push their way into manhood, and problematic effort is involved…Girls merely have to unfold. (p. 38)

In order to drive his point home, Goffman invites us to mentally reverse the gender roles in a particular ad. If the ad now strikes us as unusual or no longer “works,” then we’ve uncovered a gender code. For example, let’s consider the following pair of Kenneth Cole advertisements from Cookie, an upscale parenting magazine and the source of the ads for this study (Figure 2).
Each ad features a pair of children, one girl and one boy, whose racial diversity implies a non-sibling relationship. In both cases, the boy is significantly taller and has his arm wrapped around the girl. Do the gender depictions in these ads strike you as unusual? Probably not, and Goffman may help us understand why. As we have seen, the alert male protecting the smaller and weaker woman is already a familiar “hyper-ritualization” of adult heterosexual couples (p. 84). Thus, it appears that the boys and girls in the Kenneth Cole Kids ads are represented in a way that infantilizes the girls even further. If you doubt this analysis, try switching the genders according to stature and posture then ask yourself, “How often do we see males under the protection of larger females?”

If women are often represented as dependent children and young girls as sexually mature adults, it would seem that the visual feedback loop has finally come full
circle: women = girls = women. But the same cannot be said for boys and men. How are we to account for the gender double-standard? Mulvey (1989) argued in the early 1970’s that classical Hollywood cinema channels the viewer through the gaze of the heterosexual, white male protagonist such that any female figure on screen appears as a potential object of desire. Berger (1977) applied Mulvey’s model to both Renaissance painting and contemporary advertising, observing that, over and over again, a woman’s place is not to desire, but to be desired by others (p. 49). He asserts that women have been trained to be aware of their male spectators such that they, in turn, survey images of themselves as men do. And how do women appear to men? In the context of high fashion, the process of objectification takes an interesting twist: the male gaze is both invited and rebuffed. Messaris (1997) points out that haute couture models generally avoid smiling in favor of sullen, proud, even contemptuous expressions that seem devoid of empathy or interest towards others (p. 40). Berger describes this “absent, unfocused look” as a powerful expression designed to invite envy (p. 133). So, if fashion models are coded as highly contradictory objects of desire, what does it mean for the culture when advertising employs similar gestures and expressions while depicting children? This is the central concern of the present study.

**Indecent Exposure**

When it comes to the sexualization of children, cultural critics often trot out public enemy number one: Calvin Klein (Kilbourne 2000; Levin 2005; Merskin 2004). If the intersection of children, commerce, and sexuality is a minefield riddled with cultural taboos, then Calvin Klein rarely tip-toes around the perimeter—instead plowing straight ahead, then feigning surprise at the occasional explosion. In 1980, the Brooke
Shields campaign sold a lot of jeans and Klein soon returned to feed at the bottomless trough of American indignation. In August of 1995, cK Jeans launched a series of billboards featuring young-looking, half-naked models posed in front of cheap, wood paneling. The exposed underwear, retro hairstyles, and basement setting evoked the aesthetic of amateur adult films from the 1970’s. As a result, many accused Klein of peddling “kiddie porn” and, under threat of an FBI investigation, Klein quickly withdrew the ads.\textsuperscript{11} Ironically, the resulting controversy only served to further burnish the brand’s rebellious image and triggered another dramatic spike in sales. More recently, Klein attracted attention with a billboard above New York’s Times Square depicting two half-naked boys wearing cK briefs and bouncing on a couch. Critics cried foul, claiming that the ads sexualized children, and the ad was pulled within 24 hours (“The Year in Ad Follies,” 1999). And yet, few Americans would have seen the image had the controversy not provided news editors with the pretext to publish it in newspapers all around the country (Mohr, 2004).

Though Klein’s extensive rap sheet makes him an easy target, I have chosen not to include his ads in this study for two reasons. First, Klein’s publicity stunts have already received more than sufficient attention from the academy. Second, and more importantly, I suspect that undue focus on a single, repeat offender can be a distraction from the larger story. For example, if Klein’s ads are so deplorable and potentially harmful to the public, why do news outlets so consistently reprint and distribute them (Tucker, 2000, p. 25)? For James Kincaid (1998), the culture doth protest too much. He

\textsuperscript{11} Calvin Klein is certainly not the only designer clothing brand taking heat from the authorities. England’s Advertising Standards Authority recently deemed an Armani Jr. advertisement as “offensive, because it sexualized children and encouraged them to emulate adults, exploited the child in the photo and…could encourage pedophiles” (“Armani Advert Slammed,” December 4, 2004).
argues that even those who loudly oppose the sexualization of children unwittingly promote the very images they campaign against. Thus, the uproar against Calvin Klein is not merely a case of free publicity, but an important rite of cultural purification—a ritual that allows us to both demonize a brand and revel in the shocking images that promote it. In this morality play, Klein is cast as the scapegoat, absorbing the sins of the village and normalizing the more subtle, and ubiquitous, images of beautiful children that pervade our culture, from Shirley Temple to Macaulay Culkin. Kincaid suggests that the exceptional violation of sexual taboo only helps further obscure what exists everyday in plain sight.

Kincaid’s point is echoed by many scholars. Blaine (1999) contends that the country’s hostile reaction to the pedophilic undertones of the JonBenet murder case demonstrates the hypocrisy of “a culture in massive denial” since “JonBenet’s tight skin, lack of body fat, and youthful glow are exactly what make her beautiful to us. She is no pedophile’s fantasy—she is ours” (p. 54). Blaine goes further, noting how public outrage over the exploitation of children can quickly devolve into profitable fodder for the 24-hour news cycle, a vehicle for self-righteous voyeurism: “In spite of the breathless and shocked tone of People’s coverage of the [JonBenet] case (a tone shared by every other media report), it managed to devote over half of its pages to photos of nearly naked girls” (p. 55). Levine (2002) concurs that the culture scapegoats the pedophile “not because he is a deviant, but because he is ordinary….if we were to diagnose every American man for whom Miss (or Mr.) Teenage America was the optimal sex object, we’d have to call ourselves a nation of perverts” (pp. 26-28). Jenkins (1998) agrees, arguing that we constantly consume what we supposedly deplore.
and those who stray from moderation will suffer the consequences: “There is no question that our culture proliferates eroticized image of children, yet there is also no question that our culture engages in a constant and indiscriminate witch-hunt against anyone who shows too much interest in such images” (p. 24). Finally, Mohr (2004) describes the formula thusly: “Isolate [the] pedophilic mind from the rest of the culture, label it perverted…and, then, hey presto, sexy children are all right for viewing by everyone else. We see them—virginal and alluring—in mainstream clothing ads.” (p. 22)

Pictures of beautiful children are all around us. In the case of ads for designer children’s clothing, none of these ads are particularly shocking in themselves. In isolation, each seems to be a playful riff on kids dressing up as adults. Again, Goffman (1979) provides an important insight. In lieu of exposing only the most extreme depictions, he considers more “normal” print ads that do not immediately strike the viewer as unusual. In other words, he is interested not in the exceptions, but the rules of everyday life. For Goffman, advertisements offer us a “hyper-ritualization” of the gender display of actual interpersonal behavior. These images are not a direct reflection, but rather represent the aspirational goal of social roles. In short, these ads are important because they depict relations that, at first glance, appear to be “normal.” Therefore, just as Goffman invites us to expose hidden gender codes by reversing the roles, I would like to suggest that if we were to imagine adults striking the same poses and making the same expressions as the children in the ads considered below, we might interpret the message as something entirely other than “innocent.” Together, these ads conform to a system of very adult postures that, at best, challenge more traditional notions of
childhood and, at worst, adultify, and therefore sexualize, children. Remember that these ads are not the “bad apples” mentioned above that willingly provoke public outrage. These images may be a bit tart, but they achieve safety in numbers—so common and familiar are their depictions. Moreover, visual media do not require concerted attention from their audience in order to impact the culture. On the contrary, it is when these ads fade into the background that they surround us in their most seemingly natural and therefore powerful form.

The study that follows takes a closer look at print advertisements for designer children’s clothing that, to my knowledge, have not generated any public protest. I hope to show that many of these “good apples” are not so different from Calvin Klein’s more controversial ads. I will argue that these relatively “safe” images constitute some of the most visible symptoms of an emerging cultural trend: the adultification of children. Furthermore, if adulthood is commonly delimited as the age of consent, such depictions represent a significant first step towards the sexualization of children. But talk is cheap. How are we to distinguish between “cute” and “offensive” images? Are sexualized depictions of children purely subjective, depending the eye of the beholder? Put another way, if women are often visually coded as innocent little girls, how might children be coded as sophisticated “knowing” adults? I suspect that the answer lies in the physical demeanor of the models. In the analysis below, I hope to demonstrate that sexual maturity is not coded in these ads through the baring of skin so much as the pose of emotional display. In other words, sexuality is not exposed, it is expressed.
I have divided my research into four chapters: 1) theories of consumption; 2) methods, texts, and contexts; 3) prolepsis;\textsuperscript{12} and 4) facial expression. “Theories of Consumption” provides background on the recent and rapid growth of the designer children’s clothing industry. I suggest that this phenomenon may be driven by a form of aspirational consumption, whereby parents are invited to demonstrate their own social distinction through the tasteful clothing of their trophy children. In “Methods, Texts, and Context” I explain my approach to textual analysis of visual communication and lay out a rationale for focusing on print ads. This chapter also recounts how I support my analysis through a triangulation of literature and theory on the topic, trade journals and the popular press, and the ads themselves within the context of their delivery mechanism, in this case a high-end parenting magazine called \textit{Cookie}. The next chapter, “Prolepsis,” compares print ad campaigns, both child and adult, within the same designer brand and suggests that children’s ads encode the adult as \textit{already} within the child. In “Facial Expression,” I argue that if a smile is a sign of polite submission, then a neutral expression with direct eye contact bucks social convention, thus representing a challenge to the viewer. Moreover, most of the ads that I examined depict the latter expression which, in turn, recalls the “look” of adult haute couture models.

Though Ponce de Leon never found it, our culture remains in hot pursuit of the fountain of youth. And yet, with childhood tightly snuggled in taboo, conspicuous acts of age compression risk triggering a backlash of public outrage. My purpose here is to deepen our understanding of how print advertisements sell designer children’s clothing through images that adultify, and therefore sexualize, children. These “little adults”

\textsuperscript{12} Prolepsis is commonly defined as a foretaste of the future, a flash-forward.
circulate through a visual landscape already peopled with child-like women posed to
pleasure the heterosexual male gaze. What’s at stake here is nothing less than a new
“hyper-ritualization” of childhood as a sophisticated, self-aware, and, yes, sexual stage
of life. I now turn to the genesis of my analysis: the bourgeoning cultural phenomenon
of designer children’s clothing. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate in the next section,
little kids are big, big business.
CHAPTER 2

THEORIES OF CONSUMPTION

All fashions are class Fashions.
(Simmel, 1997, p. 189)

So many people want to dress their kids the way they dress themselves.
(Designer Tommy Hilfigger quoted in “20 Designing Minds,” 2005, p. 34)

It’s aspirational. They like my house, they like my cars, they buy my clothes—get it?
(Baby Phat Creative Director Kimora Lee Simmons, quoted in Sales, 2005, p. 1)

Figure 3: Child Magazine Fashion Show (“Focus on Fashion,” December 4, 2006)
From left to right: Baby Phat Girlz, Kenneth Cole Reaction, Phat Farm Boys

Recent sales of children’s clothing have been brisk, buoyed by an explosion of
designer brands. Advertising Age dates the trend back to 1999, when Tommy
Hilfigger and Ralph Lauren launched their children’s lines (Thompson, 2004, p. 1).

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13 According to the marketing information company NPD, “The increased emphasis on kids helped drive
sales for childrenswear [in the U.S.] up 8.2% in 2003 to $29.4 billion while men's apparel fell 8.6% to
$47.5 million and women's apparel fell 6.6% to $89.9 billion” (Thompson, 2004, p. 3). More recent
numbers continue to impress and bode well for the future. Mintel International Group, an independent
market analysis company, predicts that children’s clothing (age 0 to 12) will reach an estimated $30.6
According to the Mintel market research group, the trend is driven by fashion conscious parents living vicariously through their own children (“Mintel: Children’s Clothing,” 2005). The popular newsweekly Time concurred, pointing the finger at Generation X, “a cohort that has proved highly susceptible to displays of status” and wryly observing that “those intent on having the best-dressed child on the playground can swathe their offspring in such luxury labels as Burberry, Donna Karan and Versace, all of which offer clothes for the teething set” (Orecklin, 2003, p. 1). And Rick McKnight, a shop owner with over 50 years working in the children’s apparel business, says kids are getting older, younger: “The girls' 7-16 category used to have its own distinct, child-like look. Now, everything for that age is simply a knockoff of what women are wearing.” (quoted in “20 Reflections,” 2005, p. 36) Moreover, the media seems to have caught wind of the new craze (see Figure 4 below).

![Figure 4: Recent Headlines](image)

The high-end children’s fashion trend is a world-wide phenomenon. In January of 2006, the international trade fair Bread and Butter Berlin launched “very KIDS,” its first dedicated area for children’s fashion (“Junior Fashion,” December 4, 2006). In the same month, Pitti Immagine Bimbo, based in Florence, Italy and widely considered as the most important event on the children’s fashion calendar, surpassed ten thousand visitors for the first time in its history (“Bimbo,” December 4, 2006). New York got the fever in February of 2005 when Child magazine hosted the first children’s fashion show under the tents during Olympus Fashion Week (see Figure 3). The crowd cheered as young models paraded down the “kittenwalk” wearing the latest collections for the kids set from labels such as Kenneth Cole Reaction, Tommy Hilfiger, and Rocawear. Model-turned-actress Lindsey Lohan was on-hand to support her younger siblings Dakota and Aliana Lohan who joined Boogie and Ava Dash, children of Rocawear co-founder Damon Dash, for a stroll down the runway. Also in attendance was fashion model-cum-designer Kimora Lee Simmons, then married to Phat Fashions founder and hip-hop impresario Russell Simmons. Kimora Lee was there to promote her own line of designer children’s clothing, Baby Phat Girlz, as worn on the runway by her five-year-old daughter, Ming. Children’s fashion had gone prime time, and it was a family affair. ("Focus on Fashion," December 4, 2006)

Erin Slack, senior editor of Children's Business, declared the Child Fashion Show to be “a testament to the importance of the children's wear industry” (“Affluent Moms Fuel Boom,” March 5, 2005) and Miriam Arond, editor-in-chief of Child, concurred that high-end fashion for children had indeed turned a corner: "Really, almost every designer is going into children's fashion, which is certainly not something that was going on years ago" (ibid.) Ms. Arond should know. In 2002, Child Magazine capitalized on the groundswell by creating a special advertising section. Dubbed as a "Style Guide" for kids' fashions, the section ballooned from two pages to 28 in just two years (Thompson, 2004, p. 3).
According to Alex Sum, creative director at Guess, Kimora Lee is part of another emerging trend: celebrity moms (Feliciano, 2005, p. 1). With A-list stars like Julia Roberts, Gwyneth Paltrow, or Reese Witherspoon bearing children, motherhood has become another fashion statement opportunity. Celebrity offspring are now highly visible accessories—presented by glossy magazines in the supermarket for the general public’s adoration and imitation. Angelina Jolie, who adopted, deserves special mention as her son Maddox has become somewhat of a trend-setter for toddlers. Maddox is featured, paparazzi-style, on the Inky Dink Tees website (with famous Mom in tow) wearing the signature “Inky Dink Chinese Demon Tattoo Tee” (“The Human Canon Ball,” December 4, 2006). With such a high-profile endorsement, sales of the tee-shirt soared (ibid.). Not to be outdone, the baby boutique Glamajama reports that Britney Spears recently purchased one of their matching “Mommy” and “Baby” lounge sets while Kate Hudson bought a white “rock star” onesie for her baby boy (“Celebrities Wearing Glamajama,” December 4, 2006). Tabloids and fanzines, in turn, eagerly disclose the contents of celebrity shopping bags with the due diligence of a customs officer. *Children’s Business* spotted the angle right away, concluding that, with such mechanisms of free publicity, “it's no wonder vendors of kids wear and gear are itching to get their product in the hands of a Hollywood Mom” (“20 Big Developments,” 2005, p. 1). Perhaps this is why Donatella Versace personally, and very publicly, offered to custom design an entire wardrobe for Britney’s new baby (“Born to Couture,” December 4, 2006).

Thus far, it would seem that the child fashion boom is fueled by a confluence of at least three factors. First, we considered the possible impact of affluent consumers
who dress their children as extensions of themselves. Though this expensive hobby would likely fluctuate with the economy, the growth of the 90’s and the tax cuts in the 00’s have certainly favored the rich. An additional economic consideration might be mothers waiting longer to have children, thus compiling more resources to spend on luxuries such as designer children’s clothing (Mintel: Marketing to Moms, December 4, 2006). Second, we have reviewed fashion indicators suggesting that the rise of children’s collections has been both rapid and dramatic. Finally, the figure of the celebrity mother may represent the tipping point of the trend. As stars and models and designers, these women set the bar for aspirational consumption by keeping their kids dressed to the nines. And yet, some might wonder if this topic is really worth studying. After all, precious few parents can afford to spend hundreds of dollars on an outfit that their child will outgrow in six months. On the other hand, American families in every social strata experience, on some level, the desire to impress others through their children’s dress. So, before moving on to my formal analysis, I would like to consider the Baby Phat phenomenon through the lens of three prominent theorists of consumer culture: Bourdieu (1984), Simmel (1997), and Veblen (1899). Kimora Lee’s brand might be the perfect foil to help us address what might be driving such extravagant purchase decisions and what these ads for designer children’s clothing can tell us about the culture in general. After all, the wealthy consume for reasons similar to our own, they just have more money to throw at the problem.
Conspicuous and Vicarious

Baby Phat’s recent ad campaigns feature Kimora Lee and her children posing amidst the lush topiary gardens and yawning marble hallways of a vast estate (Figure 5). Together, the images conjure up visions of a modern-day Versailles, complete with luxury automobiles, maids, and butlers. Such blunt visual associations clearly attempt to connect the Baby Phat brand to Kimora Lee’s own, high-profile lifestyle: “My life is very—big. I'm filthy fucking rich!” (Kimora Lee quoted in Sales, 2005, p. 1) But while old money tends to be discrete, Baby Phat represents the “bling-bling” of new wealth by wearing a symbolic price tag on its sleeve. Critiques of such ostentation have a long history.

Over one hundred years ago, Veblen (1899) first proposed a “theory of the leisure class” in which he described how the elite displayed their nobility by consuming expensive and conspicuous products. He argued that elegant dress, in addition to appearing shiny and spotless on the surface, should also function as an impediment to any physical exertion; the high heel achieves sophistication through its very impracticality (p. 170). For example, if Kimora Lee is wearing a bright white pleated
skirt (Figure 6), she is more likely headed to the tennis court than the factory floor.

More to the point, Kimora Lee’s daughters wear Baby Phat Girlz outfits that seem intended more for maximum visual impact than playground-ready durability (Figure 6). The implicit suggestion is that the clothes provider (Kimora Lee) has more than enough money to replace her daughters’ outfits lest the fine fabrics become scuffed or worn.

Moreover, Veblen postulated that the leisure class signaled its social status to others through the “conspicuous consumption” of costly, unnecessary, and eminently replicable, products. That is to say, in the interest of prestige, both utility and economy in clothing were jettisoned in favor of more flamboyant, and cumbersome, displays of luxury.

And yet, notably absent in Kimora Lee’s quasi-autobiographical fairy tale of unfettered wealth is her husband, Russell Simmons. Why would these carefully composed tableaus of domestic bliss deliberately leave Daddy out of the picture? Again, Veblen (1899) offers insight: for him, conspicuous consumption was only part of the equation. Also coveted among the upper-class at the dawn of the twentieth century was the achievement of vicarious consumption whereby an aristocrat demonstrated his wealth, and thus legitimate claim to gentility, through the lavish treatment bestowed upon his servants or his wife (p. 179). Veblen went further, arguing quite forcefully that men of the leisure class treated their wives as human chattel who, through their conspicuous displays of consumption, constituted the crown jewel of their husband’s financial empire. Thus, if applied wholesale, Veblen’s theories would interpret the Baby Phat ad campaign as a tribute to the absent Russell Simmons. And yet, if much of the social hierarchy has survived the last one hundred years, much has changed as well:
women now enjoy greater economic independence from men than in Veblen’s day. The Baby Phat ad campaigns don’t just depict some anonymous “trophy wife” on the (absent) arm of a millionaire, they feature Kimora Lee: self-declared “runway staple, television personality, businesswoman, and mother” (“About Baby Phat,” December 4, 2006). In this conception, she is the master of her own destiny, the creative vision behind Baby Phat, and a self-made millionaire.¹⁵ In contemporary consumer culture, the question becomes not whether Kimora Lee is a slave to her husband, but rather who will consume on her behalf?

What I am suggesting here is a modern update of Veblen’s “theory of the leisure class” whereby women, though perhaps still considered property by some, now own property of their own, namely children. This is to say that, in popular representations such as the print ads for Baby Phat, women are slowly migrating up within the existing hierarchy from chattel to master—assuming the role of the generous benefactor behind their children’s conspicuous consumption of clothing. For example, not only can a young, upwardly mobile professional like Kimora Lee afford to keep herself and her domestic staff impeccably dressed, but also her own children—a significant achievement since dressing a growing child in the latest fashions requires great effort and expense. It appears as though Kimora Lee is inviting her intended audience (also mothers) to participate in a system of cascading levels of vicarious consumption

¹⁵ Kimora Lee has published a self-help book for female empowerment entitled Fabulosity: what it is and how to get it. Here is an excerpt from the description: “Kimora knows that in today’s ultra competitive world, it’s not enough for women just to be smart or dress well…the savvy woman must know how to combine feminine glamour with professional power, business ambition with personal values, and confidence with heart. Kimora is the living picture of all these things…Learn how to cultivate Power, Independence, Confidence, and Positivity in everything you do, whether it’s finding Mr. Right, snagging that corner office, or rocking the latest fashion trend.” (“Kimora Lee Simmons Website,” December 4, 2006)
whereby men might still be on top, but women are no longer at the bottom—they demonstrate their power through their creative and financial control over their children’s wardrobe. Such displays of status may at first seem redundant since children are, in a very real sense, the property of their parents. But, as I will argue in the next section, clothing does not only reflect on a mother’s economic role in her children’s’ well-being, but also on her personal taste.

**Affinity and Distinction**

Writing just a few years after Veblen, Simmel (1997) described how, in the United States, clothing was caught up in a perpetual cycle of invention and rejection:

> Fashions are always class fashions, by the fact that the fashions of the higher strata of society distinguish themselves from those of the lower strata, and are abandoned by the former at the moment when the latter begin to appropriate them (Simmel quoted in Carter, 1997, p. 189).

Thus, the elite blaze their own trails to avoid heavily trodden roads. Indeed, they can never rest. For once caught, even the most innovative and expensive mode of dress can be copied and made available to the masses. These cheap counterfeits can saturate the market and strip the original style of its exclusive caché. In other words, the sleek feline design of Baby Phat’s label is, in fact, its pedigree. If the label were to be pirated, reproduced, and sewed onto generic clothing, its wide availability would damage the brand.\(^1\)\(^6\) Why? Simmel argues that the elite value the scarcity of more tightly controlled commodities: wary of loud, gaudy, or tacky imitators, the upper-echelons of “fashionistas” retreat to the unadvertised brands esconced in the racks of exclusive, 

\(^{16}\) I have seen this happen first-hand. In Ecuador, public markets had entire rolls of Tommy Hilfiger labels which they simply cut off like a piece of tape, then slapped on any kind of clothing imaginable. Knock-offs are not the only threat to brand status. Some designer labels engage in selective licensing of their labels to other manufacturers. Due to the greater number of potential consumers, this arrangement can be quite lucrative but it also risks cheapening the image of the brand.
appointment-only boutiques. Thus, for both the producer and the consumer, playing the
fashion market requires a continual cleaning of closets in order to stay in style and up-
through fashion is always positive and negative: we are both what we wear and what we
do not wear (pp. 69-70).

When considered together, Veblen and Simmel contribute an incisive critique of
fashion which, nonetheless, has a fundamental flaw. As Holt (1997) points out, both
Veblen and Simmel seem to assume an “emulationist” theory of status whereby elites
must consciously and actively defend the definitions and parameters of a widely
acknowledged symbolic hierarchy. Are mothers who buy Baby Phat Girlz actually
aware that their daughters’ clothing functions as a public display of power? Maybe not.
Bourdieu (1984) takes another tack.¹⁷ He argues that objective structures of class
hierarchy are most effectively reinforced through the subjective mechanisms of widely
dispersed, disinterested, and apparently innocuous social interactions. Just as few
parents would describe taking their children to a museum as a tactical maneuver of
social domination, it’s hard to imagine mothers declaring class warfare when selecting a
cute outfit for their child. In other words, Bourdieu recognizes that dominant classes
reproduce themselves by inadvertently immersing their progeny in a system of
embodied skills, manners and tastes. The table may already be set with fine china, but
even a baby born with a silver spoon must still be taught whether it is properly used for

¹⁷ These three theorists do share common ground. Like Veblen (1973), Bourdieu (1984) argues that the
ruling class constantly justifies its claim to privilege through participation in the proper forms of
consumption. Bourdieu also echoes Simmel’s (1899) notions of invention and rejection observing that
“when they have to be justified, [tastes] are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes” (p.
205).
soup or dessert. Simply put, even if one is born into a designer lifestyle, training is required so that, over time, designer clothing feels less like a conscious decision and more like a natural fit. Moreover, Ming’s playmates will likely inhabit the same social strata and wear clothing befitting their position—thus further reinforcing the designer dress code of their common class.

This dynamic of peer-pressure within the same class brings up an important point. Unlike Simmel (1997) who tracks how styles “trickle down” the social ladder from elite runways to working class clothing racks, Bourdieu (1984) focuses his attention on the struggles within the dominant class, where proximate factions struggle over legitimacy. Put another way, if we imagine social hierarchy as a totem pole, the distance between the feet and the head is largely uncontested while more adjacent positions have more cause for rivalry. This, in a nutshell, is the endless saga of “Keeping up with the Joneses.” Most of us compete with our neighbor in some way, shape, or form, whether it’s our superior grill, greener lawn, or smarter kid. But, despite our best efforts to distinguish ourselves from those around us, we do so while affiliating through the same categories. This is to say that, socially, we inhabit similar spaces and pursue similar goals which, together, constitute a common culture which gives us all a sense of belonging to our community whether it be Harlem or the Hamptons. Fashion is thus a productive avenue through which we might analyze human

18 Competition around children can be quite cut-throat. Quart (2006) argues that “in recent years a new child-enrichment business has marched into babyhood, right through infancy, and even into the womb” (pp. 112-14). She describes a “Baby Genius Edutainment Complex” buttressed by products ranging from Baby Einstein videos to the BabyPlus Prenatal Education System which sends rhythmic auditory stimulation patterns directly to the fetus (ibid.). Of course, these companies flatter parents’ natural inkling that their progeny are destined to become prodigies. Quart bemoans how these middle-class parents get caught up in a rat race that pits them against each other in the pursuit of the right developmental “edge” that will get their child into the right preschool, up to the head of their class, and finally, into the executive suite of the social pyramid.
behavior since one of the central pleasures of clothing choice is the dialectical promise
of an adventurous, yet socially sanctioned, personal expression whereby an individual
can stand out from one crowd, yet still fit in with another.

What I wish to emphasize here is that fashion is not a myth wholly invented by
advertisers. As a form of human communication, it may be symbolic, but the wrong
clothing choices can still bring grave material repercussions (Schor, 1999, p. 38).
Conversely, the daily dressing ritual also provides repeated opportunities for acclaim.
And lest we think we don’t participate in the system, “distinction” through fashion is
everywhere. As Seiter (1993) writes,

Opting out of the commodity system can carry a great deal of value in terms of
status relations: the activity of baking one’s own bread, for example, was
embraced by many members of the upper middle class as well as intellectuals
and members of the counter-culture… the payoff for this activity comes in part
from serving home-baked bread to one’s guests: the cachet of opting out of the
consumer economy (p. 42).

In another example, affluent urban hipsters literally wear their rebellious politics on
their sleeves, culling trucker hats, blue-collar uniforms, and other “alternative” clothing
from the racks of stores, such as the Goodwill and Salvation Army, originally intended
to serve the poor. For many in the world, the deliberate selection of such counter-
cultural wardrobes are an impractical and, in some cases, impossible privilege. But for
most in the United States, clothing involves some degree of choice and, therefore,
personal expression of style. Such performances invite the spectator to attribute intent to
the wearer, who presumably dressed him/herself, and thus frames the wearer as the
creative force behind their assembled ensemble. Thus, through Bourdieu’s (1984) eyes,
we might see the optional donning of an outfit, whether ragged or brand new, as the
public display of *already* embodied tastes, the outward manifestation of an inward orientation.

Such public displays through fashion often communicate messages encrypted for specific audiences. For example, those familiar with luxury might be able to discern exclusive brands from their fabric alone—spotting a Burberry purse by its unique tartan plaid. As Schor (1999) observes, “the most expensive designer clothes carry far fewer outside labels. In haute couture, we never see them.” (p. 47) For the elite, such hidden codes can amount to a secret handshake familiar only to an exclusive cadre. Bourdieu (1984) goes further, arguing that elites seek to organize “the basic dispositions of a lifestyle into a system of aesthetic principles” (p. 206). Thus, the consistency and coherence of a brand, and its constant campaigns of identity reinforcement, make it an attractive, and reliable, component of taste. Thus, when putting on an outfit, consumers don the costume of a dual role. They are, like Kimora Lee, playing the part of both fashion model *and* designer.

**Race Matters**

Just as Bourdieu helps shift the focus of social distinction from deliberate shopping practices to internal embodied tastes, Chin (2001) reminds us that consumption has always been a “sphere of inequality” bound by very *external* constraints (p. 3). She paraphrases Marx’s (1967) assertion that workers with sufficient funds may be able to conceal their class status, but their race nonetheless remains a permanent, visible marker (p. 34). Chin (2001) notes how, in America, black skin is a *brand* unto itself, a signifier of slavery, a time when most blacks were prohibited from expressing themselves through commodities—indeed, they were treated as commodities.
themselves. As such, the masters would typically determine what their human chattel
would consume:

In public settings, clothing was a crucial marker of status, not just in terms of
social standing, but racially as well...slave dress, not unsurprisingly, offered
little in the way of style, variety, or choice...a well-dressed slave was to some
degree not only an oxymoron, but a joke among whites...slaves who aspired to
fashion were derided for also aspiring to something they could not, by definition
attain: whiteness. (pp. 39-40)

Chin recounts the story of a slave who, upon earning enough pocket money, bought a
suit and was soon reprimanded in public. Looking upon the slave and his master, the
accuser declared, “Who is master...for he dresses better than you do. Does he own you,
or do you own him?” (p. 40). The chastisement, though also intended to humble the
slave, was more directly aimed at the master who, by allowing his slave to dress above
his station, was undermining the symbolic affirmation of the existing social hierarchy:
slaves “ought to dress like slaves” (ibid.). The stakes were certainly high. With lighter
skin, the slave might have used the suit to pass for white. More to the point, the slave
took a considerable risk in buying and wearing clothing typically reserved for free white
men. Such a brazen act of aspirational consumption bespeaks Chin’s central argument
that, for black Americans, the legacy of slavery has inflated “the importance of
purchased possessions...as demonstrations of both independence and personhood” (p.
38). In other words, just as the act of owning once helped mitigate the humiliation of
being owned, contemporary consumption practices may be used as a form of
compensation, hiding slave skin under the master’s fabric.

For black Americans, then, fashion offers a symbolic corrective to the negative
associations of slavery and its consequence of persisting economic inequality. By
consuming, the descendants of slaves claim their rightful place in society as
autonomous participants in the economy who are free to purchase goods and pursue happiness etc. But it would be a mistake to assume that all Americans, regardless of race, would consume the same things if only they had the money. For proof, one need only look to the recent phenomenon of hip-hop fashion, a category that includes three of the designer children’s clothing brands in the present study. Sean John, Rocawear, and Phat Fashions (parent company of Phat Farm and Baby Phat) are all heavily associated with their founders: Sean John “Diddy” Combs, Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter and Damon Dash, and Russell Simmons respectively. But, unlike Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan (two well-established designers also considered in this study), all these newcomers are black, rose to power in the music industry, and are now multimillionaires (“Richest in Hip-Hop,” December 4, 2006). In other words, these men do not merely consume “white” clothes, they produce and sell “black” culture. To wit, Simmons once predicted that "T-shirts are gonna make me richer than records ever did," and proceeded to pave the way for the current explosion in urban apparel, a market valued at $6 billion in 2004 (Sales, 2005, p. 1). In addition to Diddy and Jay-Z, a whole host of high-profile artists have followed Simmons’ lead including Nelly (Apple Bottoms), Beyoncé (House of Dereon), 50 Cent (G Unit), and LL Cool J (Todd Smith) who summed up the transition thusly: “LL’s a rapper. Todd Smith is a brand.” (Navarro, 2006, p. 1) Thus, much of the success of these entertainers-cum-entrepreneurs is based on a recognition of race as a brand, marketable not in spite, but because of its distinction from the dominant culture.

The freedom to own rather than be owned remains deeply charged with political implications. We can see an example of this during the 1960’s, when some black

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19 Sean John “Diddy” Combs tops the list with an estimated net worth of $346 million, followed by Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter ($340 Million), Russell Simmons ($325 Million), and Damon Dash ($200 Million)
Americans rejected straightening their hair in order to appear more “white” and instead grew out afros, declaring that “Black is beautiful.” This form of personal style was favored by many of the Black Panther Party, a militant socialist organization advocating “Black Power” and inspired by the confrontational style of Malcom X (Cleaver, 2001). What’s more, the Black Panthers were cool, sporting a stylish outfit of sunglasses, leather jackets, black berets. The Panthers were very astute at media relations, posing Huey Newton, one of the party’s founders, in the wicker chair of an African King holding a rifle in one hand and a spear in the other (Figure 6). This powerful image of self-determination became an icon of black nationalism and provides an important link in the Rocawear ad’s chain of signification. Notice that the female, super-model Naomi Campbell, is wearing an afro and sitting in an almost identical wicker chair (Figure 6). Instead of holding weapons, she raises a closed fist—the widely recognized symbol of black power—and a cool expression of determination. Thus, the attitude of the model connotes the political will of the original referent and the freedom to be fashionable is placed within the existing context of oppression and resistance. Or, as Chin (2001) puts it, “the history of black consumption in America has been one of engineered deprivation, struggle, and violence, as well as innovation, creativity, and, in some cases, transcendence” (p. 34).

During the 1968 Olympics, just months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., two black American athletes raised their fists in the air on the podium during the medal award ceremony. This symbol of black power so offended the International Olympic Committee that they banned the athletes from the Olympic Games for life.
If the consumption of designer children’s clothing occurs within an already existing matrix of social disparities, then perhaps no figure better illustrates the complex intersections of race, class, and gender than the creative director of Baby Phat Girlz—Kimora Lee. On the one hand, her modeling trajectory was a typical rags to riches story. Like Kate Moss, Kimora Lee was discovered as a 14-year-old diamond in the rough, then whisked away to Paris where Karl Lagerfeld would describe her biracial features (half-black, half-Japanese) as “the face of the 21st century.” But all was not well at the House of Chanel. Kimora Lee was insolent and, after two seasons, Lagerfeld told her flatly: “It’s a wonderful thing I’ve created with you, but now you’re a $5,000-tote-bag-wearing monster, and for that, I am sorry. Now sit down and be quiet!” (quoted in Eaton, 2004, p. 1) When considered within the historical context of slavery, such an episode seems rife with neocolonial implications. Consider this: a rich, white European (Lagerfeld) bids on the body of an unknown, exotic girl (Kimora Lee), ships her
overseas, then tells her what to eat, what to wear, and how to walk. When the girl expresses her own will, she is harshly reprimanded by her master. Perhaps most disturbing is the discourse of Male as creator of female beauty and Female as monster to be controlled.

Control is a constant theme in much of Kimora Lee’s press coverage. Crass and indelicate, she is the bull reeking havoc in high society’s china shop—a role which, according to Eaton (2004), has made her the butt of many jokes and an “irresistable pincushion” for the New York tabloids. For instance, even while claiming to hold the world’s largest collection of Louis Vuitton she threatens to “beat a bitch's ass" if she catches her husband with another woman (Sales, 2005, p. 1). And yet, even as she runs roughshod over unwritten rules, Kimora’s many contradictions may be a fundamental part of her appeal. She is a trophy wife with her own career. She objectifies her body yet retains creative control of Baby Phat. As a model-cum-mother, she embodies the virgin/whore dichotomy. Even her race cannot be pinned down: “I consider myself to be one of the black women in fashion who made it, but black women don’t look at me like that.” (Kimora Lee quoted in Eaton, 2004, p. 1). And, as her ex-husband suggests, Kimora Lee may be the victim of a racist double-standard: “Why is everyone worrying about what she spends? They should be worried about what Roberto Cavalli spends, too. What Ralph Lauren spends, too. How many cars does Tommy Hilfiger have, by the way?” (Russell Simmons quoted in Eaton, 2004, p. 1) Kimora, for her part, concurs: “I don't apologize for my diamonds, Rolls-Royce, Range Rover or anything. Look, Queen

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21 Though Baby Phat was sold in 2004 to the Kellwood Company, a clothing conglomerate, reportedly netting Kimora $20 million; she stayed on as creative director (Sales, 2005, p. 1).
Elizabeth has more diamonds than me. Why don't people attack her for it?” (Kimora Lee Simmons quoted in “Kimora Lee's Em-phat-ic,” December 4, 2006)

Why is the consumption of black Americans so closely scrutinized? Remember that consumption takes place within “spheres of inequality” built upon generations of racist social hierarchies (Chin, 2001, p. 3). In the United States, slaves’ clothing and possessions were severely restricted lest they pretend to achieve equality with their white masters. Perhaps Kimora Lee’s “over-the-top” displays of her new-found wealth and power present a similar challenge to the current establishment. Perhaps, as a woman of mixed race, she does not know her proper “place” in society: a subject, not a ruler. And what, exactly, entitles the Queen Elizabeth to her diamonds? Her birthright. She inherited the throne. Thus, barring any future miscegenation, there will never be a black Queen of England. Kimora Lee’s birthright, on the other hand, yokes her to the plow of her ancestors. She is descended from slaves and, therefore, must strive to overcome her heritage if she is to enter “polite” society. The irony here is that Queen Elizabeth and Ralph Lauren both symbolize “old money” which can be traced back to slavery, colonialism, and other forms of white conquest and exploitation of people of color. So, perhaps Kimora Lee’s outrageous antics resonate because they exact revenge on past oppressors. Not only is she free to keep her daughters in her own possession, and clothe them as she wishes, but now the white men work for her. For example, her manager, Jack McCue, is at Kimora Lee’s constant beck and call, even schlepping her shopping bags and looking after Ming (Sales, 2005, p. 1). It would appear that the last laugh is hers.
To sum up, Kimora Lee’s ads for Baby Phat and Baby Phat Girlz may seem a little over-the-top, but they should not be viewed as “bad apples” or altogether different from other high-end designers. Simply put, these ads bear a heavy burden. Kimora Lee must both compensate for her race through an obvious affiliation with luxury while also exploiting her racial niche as a form of “urban” distinction. Put another way, Kimora Lee is “new money” and therefore must start from scratch, hustling to gain respect while “white” brands like Ralph Lauren are “old money” and can therefore rest on the laurels of past accomplishments. Indeed, Lauren’s ads portray an image of pure-bred New England blueblood—the inheritance of racial dominion. To wit, Donna Karan may be a woman, but she’s not black. Likewise, Jay-Z may be black, but he’s not a woman. Thus, Kimora Lee must sprint to catch up. Her ads defend, position, and exploit her permanent, public brand of biracial woman—inviting consumers to propel her upward, through their patronage, then aspire to join her. After all, shouldn’t black people own the products of black culture? Buy Rocawear make Jay-Z a mogul. Buy Baby Phat so Kimora Lee can live like a queen. More than just clothes, fashion is economic struggle at its most symbolic and material.

Unfortunately, the design of this study does allow for a more thorough treatment of race in fashion advertisements. Suffice it to say that “black” brands must often compensate for the past and present practices of a racist society. And yet, bearing in mind this important difference, it is striking how most of these ads, regardless of race, take such a similar visual approach in their depiction of children. I will argue that these images display vicarious consumption, affinity, and distinction to their viewers by referring to an already existing system of symbolic meaning. What are we to make of
these ads? The next chapter will describe my own approach to analyzing print ads for designer children’s clothing as seen in *Cookie* magazine, an up-scale parenting magazine aimed at affluent mothers.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS, TEXTS, AND CONTEXTS

“A commercial photograph is a ritualization of social ideals.”
(Erving Goffman, 1979, p. 84).

How are we to “read” print advertisements for designer children’s clothing?

This chapter will outline how some communication scholars have conceptualized visual analysis, then turn to a description of my preferred method as well as the rationale behind the selection of this particular set of ads. Finally, I will argue that these images should be considered within three levels of already established context. Moreover, the following pages are intended to orient the reader to my own particular brand of textual analysis.

Methods

For many scholars (Danesi, 2002; Hill & Helmers, 2004; Messaris, 2003), recent explorations in visual communication, or visual rhetoric, are based on semiotic analysis. In short, this method seeks to dissect visual signs into their component parts: the signifier (a symbol that “stands in” for the object) and the signified (the mental concept of the object). For example, a picture of a child (the signifier) calls to mind the idea (signified) of a child and, together, they form the sign “child.” The formula may appear simple on the surface, but signifiers can have very complex meanings. For example, someone might burn a colorful cloth with little fanfare, but if those colors consist of red stripes, white stars, and a blue square, all hell breaks loose. In other words, the American flag is a signifier with both a literal denotation (colored cloth representing the
United States) and a whole slew of symbolic, and possibly contradictory, connotations (love of country, freedom of speech, imperialism, etc.). Similarly, the visual signifier of a child would denote the literal, or face value, meaning (a small, young person) and simultaneously connote a set of signifieds, or extended symbolic meanings (innocence, vulnerability, youth, the future, etc.). Clearly, such associations between signifier and signified are sometimes arbitrary and always determined by cultural conventions and particular historical moments. Semiotics offers us an analytical crowbar with which we might pry apart the ideas and products that advertisements seek to bind together.22

Theoretically, the signifier and the signified are joined in the brain to form the sign at the moment of consideration/comprehension, but in practice, they are never separate (Williamson, 1978, p. 17). Nonetheless, it is useful to consider them independently in order to evaluate the non-necessary relationship between them. For a concrete demonstration of this abstract concept, we might look to the deliberate associations of fashion advertisements. Denim pants, once represented by the brand Levi-Strauss as durable work clothes, have gained a new patina of sexy sophistication under the aegis of Guess. Through extensive ad campaigns, the functional value of denim pants has been trumped by the conceptual value of designer jeans: pants once worth $20 are now given a designer label and sold for $100. Messaris (1997) has written extensively about the visual construction of meaning in print media. Among the most egregious offenders, advertisements for cigarettes and hard liquor seek to

22 Peirce (1931) and de Saussure (1959) developed distinct theories of semiotics, or the study of symbolic structures of meaning. For Peirce, the codes of human communication consist of a system of signs, each of which contains three components: object, representamen, and interpretant. According to this ‘triadic’ approach, the ‘object’ of an actual child could be denoted by the ‘representamen’ of a photograph depicting a child which, in turn, would connote the ‘interpretant,’ or the meaning of ‘child.’ Saussure elaborates on the difference between denotation and connotation in his conception of the sign as a dyad,
overcome the threats they pose to a consumer’s health with *implied* selling propositions. For instance, cigarette ads typically present smokers as young, vigorous models in a natural, outdoor setting while liquor ads promise to facilitate sex (pp. 76-77). If clearly stated, such claims would be patently ridiculous at best; smoking inhibits physical fitness and excess liquor consumption can cause erectile disfunction. But even if slipping on a pair of Guess jeans does not a sex symbol make, such propositions do not attempt to conform to the rigors of rational thought, but rather use images that appeal to the outer reaches of the imagination:

As advertisers themselves have occasionally acknowledged, the lack of explicitness of visual syntax has a very important consequence for practitioners of visual persuasion: It makes it possible for them to convey persuasive messages in visual form that would be controversial or unacceptable if spelled out verbally. (Messaris, 1998, p. 76)

In the study of print ads for designer children’s clothing that follows, I focus on the possible *connotations* of the images. I draw on the work of Hall (1980) who famously challenged the traditional sender/receiver notions of communication with his encoding/decoding model. According to Hall, mass media flows through a “continuous circuit” of cultural production whereby a message is transformed from its original material/institutional context into discourse (encoding) and then transformed again back into daily social practices (decoding) by the audience. In other words, there are no innocent images, a child is not “just a child,” and any visual signifier mobilized in a print advertisement brings along luggage already packed with signifieds, or symbolic meanings. Thus, advertisers seeking to encode their product with certain connotations must draw on the discursive structures of past practices, or the maps of already-

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combining the signifier (a symbol that ‘stands in’ for the object—roughly equivalent to Peirce’s ‘representamen’) and the signified (the mental concept of the object).
established cultural conventions. Jhally (1987) describes these conventions as codes based on “the relationship of the commercial to external belief systems…the store of experience upon which both the advertiser and the audience draw in their participation in the construction of ‘commodity meaning’” (pp. 139-40). McQuarrie and Mick (1999) echo this notion of audience participation in summarizing their research on visual rhetoric in advertising: “the meanings provoked by the visual tropes are not on the page or in the picture but rather require an active construal by the reader, a construal that requires a body of cultural knowledge before it can occur” (p. 49). As such, the viewer of the image may not possess the requisite “store of experience” to comply with the “preferred reading” intended by the advertiser. Nevertheless, the power of “encoding” lies in its “constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate” (Hall, 1980, p. 135).

Williamson (1978) concurs that the audience must close the circuit of interpretation, arguing that the “transfer of significance does not exist as completed in the ad, but requires us to make the connection…therefore this meaning does not exist until we complete the transference ourselves” (p. 19). Thus, the decoding process extends well beyond the formal limits of any given ad and into the wider “referent system” of images already existing in the viewer’s head. This is to say that each new image refers to one we’ve already seen. For instance, the meaning of the American flag example mentioned above could shift from “liberation” to “occupation” depending on a viewer’s citizenship, politics, life experience, etc. This is what Barthes (1977) meant by “anchorage”—the idea that visual images in advertisements may be polysemous (open to many meanings) but remain rooted in experience (p. 218). The moral of the story is
that when they participate in the mode of symbolic exchange, encoders must work
within the confines of the pre-existing referent system.\(^{23}\) As Danesi (2002) puts it,
“every signifier is caught up in a system of references to other signifiers; it is a node
within a network of distributed signifieds” (p. 26). Within such an elaborate, and well
established, grid of symbolic meaning, advertisers are forever plagiarizing previous
signs even as they seek to create new connotations. Semiotics is a way for us to
reinstate the missing quotation marks and cite sources. Perhaps Goffman (1979) said it
best:

> By and large, advertisers do not create the ritualized expressions they
employ; they seem to draw upon the same corpus of displays, the same
ritual idiom, that is the resource of all of us who participate in social
situations, and to the same end: the rendering of glimpsed action readable
(p. 84).

Drawing on the semiotic tools outlined above, I will argue that many ads for
designer children’s clothing maintain a consistent brand identity by referencing the
visual signifiers (or “ritualized expressions”) already established by their adult
equivalents. Furthermore, I will attempt to tease out how the implied selling
propositions of the images invite the creative participation of their readers. Though I
will not attempt to speculate how these ads are actually perceived by their target market,
I hope that my textual analysis might help explain how the encoders of these visual
messages imagine the referent systems that their intended audience will bring to the
interpretive process. In other words, my conclusions are necessarily tentative. This is
my own reading of the texts—an exploratory study, grounded in theory, intended to
serve as a guide for future audience research. As I turn to a description of my methods

\(^{23}\) Throughout this report, I deploy colloquialisms and other metaphors and turns of phrase which require
a certain common-denominator of cultural experience between the decoder (you) and the encoder (me). It
for selecting and evaluating print ads for designer children’s clothing, I would like to add one more caveat. As a visually oriented scholar, I have taken to heart Messaris’ (2003) admonition that we ought to be “more sensitive to the inherent difficulty of exploring visual phenomena through a nonvisual mode of communication” (p. 555). As a reader of this text, I would advise you to follow suit.

**Texts**

The children’s clothing ads that I analyze below were drawn from Cookie, an upscale parenting magazine launched in 2005 by Fairchild Publications. Dubbed by the *New York Times* as “the first significant new title in the parents' category in 15 years” (Green, 2006, p.1), Cookie convinced *Advertising Age* that publishers are “banking on the growing pool of advertisers of upscale kids’ products” eager to reach “the roughly 22 million U.S. households with incomes of more than $75,000 and children under 10” (Thompson, 2005, p. 1). In fact, Cookie is part of “a boomlet of other parenting magazines” trying to get a piece of the action including *Bundle* and *Wondertime* from the Disney corporation (Seelye, 2005, p. 1). Similar to its fresh batch of rivals, Cookie's initial circulation of 300,000 is dwarfed by parenting magazine stalwarts such as *Child* (1 million), *American Baby* (2 million), and *Parents* and *Parenting* which both reach approximately 2.2 million readers (Fine, 2004, p. 8). To stand out in such a saturated marketplace of instruction manuals, Editor-in-Chief Pilar Guzman has positioned *Cookie* as a lifestyle guide: "Our emphasis is on the mom and rediscovering the woman within the mom…you have to take care of yourself to be a good parent” (Brady, 2005, p. 1). Guzman, whose own living room was recently featured in the “House Proud” section of the *New York Times*, envisions *Cookie* as “catering to a mom with a

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is a writing-style which adds color to the prose while running the risk of befuddling the reader.
sophisticated lifestyle” (ibid.). Indeed, Guzman seems to embody her magazine’s target market: she is an affluent professional and “fashion-forward” mother living in New York City. As Green (2006) writes, Cookie is pitched to “style-minded parents who would like the new baby’s gear to fit seamlessly with their vintage Danish modern pieces and who would rather take their vacations in Costa Rica than Orlando” (p. 1). It’s no wonder Guzman sums up her editorial role thusly: “We're artfully curating a lifestyle” (Brady, 2005, p. 1).

Thus far, Cookie’s not-so-secret recipe seems to be working. The premiere issue attracted “35 brands that had never advertised in a parenting title before” including Land Rover and Lexus (Smith, 2005, p. 1). And, according to Advertising Age, Eva Dillon, VP-publisher of Cookie, is confident that advertising revenue will continue to grow with European brands like Dolce & Gabbana and Armani introducing their children’s lines to the U.S. market (Thompson, 2005, p. 1). Dillon brings up an important point. In my initial stages of research, I discovered a wide array of European upscale parenting magazines in Europe (England’s Junior UK, Germany’s Kids Wear, Spain’s Ninsmoda, and Italy’s Vogue Bambini just to name a few) while in the United States the niche seems to be occupied by Cookie alone.24 Considering that the boom of high-end clothing for children is a recent phenomenon in the United States, both Cookie’s emergence and its monopoly of the market should come as no surprise. Furthermore, Cookie’s publisher (Fairchild) is also the owner of the journal Children’s Business, so the company’s investment in the new title is a bellwether of future growth. According to the magazine’s own demographic data, the estimated total audience of
*Cookie* is 1,200,000 with 84% women, a median age of 36 years old, and a median household income over $88,000/year ("Cookie Circulation," December 4, 2006). It would appear that, in aiming at its intended target of affluent mothers, *Cookie* has scored a bulls-eye. Thus, when searching for an American media vehicle for print advertisements of designer children’s clothing, *Cookie* seemed the logical choice: I drew my ads from the first five issues of 2006.

I further narrowed my selection of images through three sets of criteria. First, all of the ads had to be for extensions of already established international adult brands. As I wished to compare adult fashion ads with their younger equivalents, I was not interested in small labels specializing in children’s clothing. Moreover, I found that the upper-echelon of children’s clothing does not tend to invest in mass media advertising campaigns, but rather limits its marketing to exclusive trunk sales and select boutiques. Thus, the clothing ads that I examine below by no means represent the most expensive brands on the children’s clothing market. Second, I kept the brand identities constant by limiting my cross-generational comparison of ad campaigns to seven international clothing companies: Rocawear, Baby Phat, Ralph Lauren, Diesel, Kenneth Cole, Sean John, and DKNY. I did so since all of these companies have aggressively cultivated a distinct “look” for their adult lines, but with different customers in mind. For example, Ralph Lauren consistently presents pictures of models cavorting in the Hamptons, a favorite WASP vacation spot just east of New York City. In contrast, Rocawear

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24 The only domestic rival to *Cookie* that I could find is *Violet*, a quarterly title with a smaller circulation (100,000 to *Cookie*’s 300,000) published by the stylist Keki Mingus, daughter of the renowned jazz musician Charles Mingus.

25 I drew the adult ads from women’s fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and various online sources.

26 WASP is an abbreviation for “White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant.”
locates its vision of “urbanwear” squarely on the streets of Brooklyn while DKNY takes their clothing to the Upper West Side. My point is that each of these companies has encoded their adult brand with connotations designed to appeal to the referent systems of particular audiences. In broad strokes, Rocawear signifies black athletes and hip-hop artists posing on the set of a music video (see Figure 7) while DKNY represents white celebrities caught in the sudden glare of the paparazzi (Figure 8).
Figure 7: Rocawear Ad (“Rocawear Ad,” December 4, 2006)
The third criterion for selecting my pool of designer children’s clothing ads involved models’ mode of address—more specifically, eye contact and facial expression. To give you a general idea of what I had to choose from, the premiere issue of *Cookie* (January 2006) had 26 full-page ads for children’s clothing. Of these 26, 18 had at least one child model staring straight back at the camera and 14 had at least one child model who was not smiling. But most interesting to me were the 10 ads that featured at least one child model who was looking at the camera and not smiling. Why did these ads catch my eye? First, I was intrigued by how photography could simulate the experience of eye-to-eye contact. Second, I wondered what “blank” expressions

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27 If a single ad spread out over multiple pages, I counted each page separately. Though I did not include fashion spreads or any other type of “advertorial” content, it’s worth mentioning that the “Fancy That” fashion spread featured many close-ups of serious child models staring straight into the camera (Figure 8: DKNY Ad (*Vogue*, November 2005, pp. 34-35))
might mean in the context of images depicting direct address. The glum ads in *Cookie*
stand in sharp contrast against more middle-brow magazines such as *Parents*, which are
chock-full of advertising with spaghetti-stained grins and romping toddlers. Indeed,
during the course of my research, I looked at hundreds of ads in a wide variety of
parenting magazines. Though not a content analysis, the overall correlation appears to
be that the more expensive the brand of clothing, the more serious the child model
wearing it.

**Contexts**

The children’s clothing lines in this study are *extensions* of their adult
equivalents (and draw much of their caché from the relationship) so it follows that they
would be signified in similar settings and displayed on models wearing similar
expressions. Thus, like a visual paternity test, these ads can help confirm a descendant’s
affiliation with the proper bloodline. But such correlations between a designer label’s
adult clothing and the children’s extension is only the most immediate of three levels of
context that we should consider for these texts. Since I conceptualize these levels as
concentric circles, I will approach them from the perimeter before returning to the
center.

The widest of the three contextual levels which contain, and thus help explain,
these ads is the long established system of aesthetics in haute couture fashion. As I
hinted above, the child models in my selection of ads seem to be “pouting” in a very
familiar gesture of distinction. Messaris (1997) has noticed a similar pattern:

> Anyone who has looked at ads for clothes and other fashion items will
have noticed a striking difference between the images in high-fashion
magazines, on one hand, and ads for less-expensive products, on the other. This difference can also be observed in a comparison between the demeanor of haute couture runway models and the facial expressions of their counterparts in such venues as the Home Shopping Network. Models who display moderately priced clothing usually smile and strike ingratiating poses. But high-fashion models are generally unsmiling and sometimes openly contemptuous. So pronounced is this contrast that it is tempting to formulate it in a simple rule: the higher the fashion, the more sullen the expression. (Messaris, 1997, pp. 38-40)

As we can see, children’s fashion did not develop in a vacuum. Likewise, the images that advertise it circulate among the traditional tropes and conventions of adult fashion shows, seasonal cycles, and the highly stylized poses and sullen expressions of supermodels. *Cookie* also entered a U.S. magazine market already immersed in women’s fashion titles vying for the same demographic: affluent women. But since *Cookie* dominates the “upscale family lifestyle” section of the newsstand, it enjoys a unique niche and therefore need not steal subscribers from other style-oriented magazines. Rather, a symbiotic strategy seems more likely. Fairchild Publications can design *Cookie* to appeal to the existing audience of women’s fashion magazines. This is a known universe, whose readership is intimately familiar with the visual architecture and editorial layout of an established mass media genre. In essence, women’s fashion magazines provide a “referent system” for *Cookie*’s potential decoders, which, in turn, help editors to more successfully encode the magazine. This appears to demonstrate Danesi’s (2002) idea that “…media representations are, more often than not, recycled signifiers, dressed up in contemporary garb to appeal to contemporary audiences” (p. 35). In other words, *Cookie* is using an old recipe with new ingredients. But don’t take my word for it. Mediaweek predicted that “Cookie will service 25-to-45-year-old
parents with upscale fashionista sensibilities” and was destined to become “…an aspirational read, just like *Vogue*” (Smith, 2005, p. 1).

If *Cookie* does, in fact, look like *Vogue* for parents, it probably is—both are owned by Advance Publications, a large media conglomerate with extensive interests in cable television and newspapers in over twenty American cities. So it should come as no surprise that *Cookie* took out an advertisement in the August 2005 issue of *W*, also owned by Advance Publications. In addition, the flagship franchise for *Cookie’s* publisher (Fairchild) is *Women’s Wear Daily* (or WWD) which, according to the company’s own website, is widely considered "the fashion bible" and “serves as the voice of authority, international newswire and agent of change for the fashion, beauty and retail industries” (Fairchild Publications Website, June 21, 2006). Moreover, *Cookie* was created by encoders who not only know fashion but, more importantly, know the context of audiences who decode fashion texts.

The next concentric circle of context is closely related to the first and includes the physical environment of the magazine into which these print ads have been placed. I postulated earlier that the internal structure of *Cookie* was likely built according to the existing blueprint of women’s fashion magazines and I will now provide some evidence in support of this argument.

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28 The matrix of cross-ownership is both vast and complex. In fact, it’s difficult to figure out who exactly publishes what. Fairchild, which is credited as Publisher on *Cookie’s* masthead, is a division of Condé Nast, mega-publisher of dozens of titles including *Vogue*. Curiously, on its website, Condé Nast also claims to publish *Cookie*. Between them, Fairchild and Condé Nast publish some forty titles. (“Who Owns What,” December 4, 2006).
A distinguishing characteristic of magazines like *Vogue* and *W* is the fashion spread. Usually placed at the back of each issue, the fashion spread is a series of photographs that hovers somewhere between advertisement and editorial. The models are typically shot in glamorous locales while wearing mixed outfits of designer clothing. Like a typical clothing catalogue, a small paragraph of text tucked away in corner communicates the brand names, prices, and purchasing information for all the clothes. All three issues of *Cookie* that I examined included fashion spreads. In fact, the
January issue of 2006 boasted a pair. The first was entitled “Fancy That” and was based on the conceit of girls playing dress up (Figure 9). The mostly black and white single-portrait-style photographs were stark in tone and featured a racially diverse set of models who all appeared to be around the age of seven. Some wore haughty expressions and most were gazing slightly down at the camera. This particular fashion spread was the perfect promotional vehicle as it featured clothing both “from her closet” (presumably the child) and “from Mom’s closet” (Cookie, January 2006, pp. 186-197).

When I read the product descriptions in the Cookie’s “Fancy That” fashion spread, I found that the clothing “from her closet” included brands such as Baby Phat Girlz, Rocawear, DKNY Kids, and Diesel Kids…all of whom just happened to have taken out full pages of paid advertising elsewhere in the magazine. As Kilbourne (2000) points out, this may not, in itself, prove a quid-pro-quo, but it certainly questions more traditional distinctions between advertisement and editorial: “In women’s and teen magazines it is virtually impossible to tell the fashion layouts from the ads. Indeed, they exist to support each other.” (Kilbourne, 2000, p. 141) According to Advertising Age, Cookie is simply following in Vogue’s footsteps: “Like with trendy adult fashions, much of the marketing for upscale kids' products is public-relations-based seeding of product with magazine editors and celebrities to get editorial mentions” (Thompson, 2005, p. 1). Furthermore, fashion advertisers look to both Cookie and Vogue because they “have no choice but to advertise in certain glossies, because sexy, brand-mythologizing magazine ads are their brand lingua franca. The brands are the print ads, and vice-versa.” (Dumenco, 2006, p. 24) Thus, it would appear that editorial mentions

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29 The second photo spread was called “Two on the Town” and told the story of a young mother and her son, staying together in a fancy hotel, ordering room service, bouncing on the bed, and then going out on
in fashion spreads often work in tandem with more traditional forms of paid advertising.  

Another important aspect of Cookie’s physical environment is the spatial relationship that exists between offers of advice and plugs for products. For example, magazine media is typically encountered as a visual diptych of two opposing pages attached at a hinge with editorial pages often sequentially paired with ads. In the January 2006 issue of Cookie, many such couplings seemed to work in tandem. Here are a few examples:

- Article on treating colds + Braun thermometers ad
- Article about organizing photo albums + Nikon camera ad
- Article on dairy and organic foods + “100% natural” Babybel cheese ad

Perhaps the issue’s strongest synergy between ad and editorial occurs between an article entitled “Book Smarts” (a guide to awards for literature) and an advertisement for Kashi “Mighty Bites” cereal (see Figure 10). The text of the article is complemented by a teetering stack of books while the ad features a “eureka” light bulb made of cereal and the greeting “Hello brain. Meet your new favorite cereal.” Moreover, the placement of the ad opposite “Book Smarts” only reinforces Kashi’s not-so-implied selling proposition that eating their cereal will make your child smarter.

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30 Another spatial similarity between women’s fashion magazines and Cookie is the amount of real estate between the front cover and the table of contents. Like many adult glossies, Cookie makes the reader wade through a sea of ads before making landfall—in the premier issue, I counted 15 pages.
Many visual communication scholars have considered how physical proximity of messages might lead to a transfer of meaning. Messaris (1993) recounts how early Soviet film pioneer Lev Kuleshov found that viewers decoded the same face as representing different emotions, depending on the nature of the image immediately preceding it (p. 87). Since then, this “kuleshov effect” has been used to describe juxtapositions of consecutive images that create an association of meanings. This is relevant to the study at hand since magazines tend to be flipped through, front-to-back such that the pages are viewed as part of a sequence of images or visual flow. Therefore, it would be a mistake to simply pluck an ad from its surrounding ecology and study it with exquisite regard. We should, whenever possible, examine visual texts within the context of their consumption. In her look at everyday use of women’s
magazines, Hermes (1995) reports that her informants had very little to say about what they read on a daily basis. She warns that “media use is not always meaningful…magazines may be opened and leafed through, television sets may by on, but that is hardly an indication that they are ‘read’ consciously, seriously, or with animation” (p. 15). Moreover, I doubt many Cookie readers would go to the trouble (as I have) to try and parse out the actual boundaries between purchased ad space and objective editorial. Indeed, it is a rabbit hole that offers little reward to the curious.33 Rather, I wish to argue that the space demarcated by the covers of Cookie is, in essence, the walls of a gallery housing a collection of images and information, an exclusive club of high-brow culture. Membership might be bought or earned, but when Cookie puts together their all-star team of products, these brands will do whatever it takes to get on the roster. On the decoding side, we are left to idly browse through Cookie’s exhibits. In a series of “kuleshov effects,” the juxtaposed images of fashion spreads and product displays invite us to form associations—threads with which we might weave together a legitimate referent system of the good life. After all, Cookie burnishes its own reputation by drawing from a canon of well-established brand signifiers (DKNY, David Yurman, Ralph Lauren) and the valuable signifieds they connote (luxury, glamour, and good taste).

32 I do not have any systematic research to back this commonsensical claim. I did, however, conduct surveys with Cookie subscribers in the Spring of 2005. Five out of six of my respondents described their reading style as flipping through “front-to-back” (Boulton, 2006). 33 Cookie certainly dedicates plenty of pages to stylish displays of “Editor’s Picks” and “Holiday Gift Guides.” And its “Smart Cookie” section is downright effusive in its praise of time-saving gifts, gadgets, and get-aways. Even the magazine’s product review articles do not quite muster the meritocracy of Consumer Reports. For example, in the Dec/Jan 2006 issue, every stroller reviewed is ranked as a “best of” something. Other issues display shoes and tricycles like a glossy catalogue and some of the magazine’s furniture displays rival the most creative and well-lit IKEA showrooms.
In the beginning of this chapter, I explained how semiotic theory underpins my chosen method of textual analysis. I then described how Cookie was the most appropriate text for pulling print advertisements for designer children’s clothing and how, after limiting my sample to brand extensions of international designer labels, I tended to select images depicting child models in direct address wearing non-smiling expressions. The second half of this chapter was dedicated to an evaluation of two different levels of context surrounding these ads: general tropes of fashion and the visual architecture of the magazine itself. The next chapter will examine how print ads create meaning for brands and create continuity across age groups. These works of art may be aesthetically pleasing, but I intend to argue that they tell a disturbing story. In other words, if Cookie’s editor-in-chief is “artfully curating a lifestyle” (Brady, 2005, p. 1), then my own self-appointed role is that of the unauthorized docent. For the next stop on our tour, and the epicenter of the three contexts, please proceed to the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4

PROLEPSIS

Publicity is about social relations, not objects.
(Berger, 1977, p. 132)

In the previous chapter, I discussed the first two concentric circles of context for the designer children’s clothing ads in this study. The innermost level, and the focus of this chapter, is the relationship between ads for both the adult and children’s lines within the same designer brand. I will review some of the structural continuities of the ads’ designs and pay particular attention to the child presented as the “adult-to-be.” Furthermore, I will seek to demonstrate that the overall effect of many of these images is, in fact, a prolepsis: the future adult is depicted as already within the model child.34

Brand Bloodlines

The contextual relationship between the adult and children’s lines of the same brand is both intimate and expansive. As we draw meaning from a singular ad, we crawl through the looking glass and out into the wider universe of the brand as a whole. In this case, we are not only regarding an ad for children’s clothing, but also relating it to the other images we may have seen promoting the adult line—our referent system for the brand. Thus, any symbolic family ties are mutually reinforced through visual tropes of resemblance that “rhyme” a consistent brand identity across the adult and children’s

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34 Prolepsis is commonly defined as a foretaste of the future, a flash-forward.
In short, the children’s ads constantly refer to the adult ads. Indeed, such brand recognition is a type of symbolic meaning that carries great value in the marketplace—like a family fortune of connotation, carefully managed by the parent company to maximize the endowment of future heirs.

![Figure 11: Rocawear Ad (“Rocawear Ad,” December 4, 2006)](image)

Rocawear

The Rocawear ad above (Figure 11) features Jay-Z (rap artist, hip-hop impresario, and co-founder of the brand) seated on the set of a music video. He is flanked by flood lights and an entourage, and resembles a king holding court from his throne. Indeed, Jay-Z is holding a megaphone (a tool often used to direct film crews)

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35 I am not using the verb “rhyme” to evoke any widely established semiotic concept. Someone may, in fact, have already developed such a term for visual analysis, but I am, as of yet, unaware of it. My use here is quite specific. By “rhyme,” I mean the way in which one image recalls another through deep formal similarities. The former is less an exact replica of the latter and more like the second line in
and sitting in the most powerful seat on set (the director’s chair). It’s important to note that this ad is only a picture; there is no descriptive text. Consequently, in order to make sense of it, I was obliged to draw from my own “store of experience” or “cultural knowledge” (Jhally, 1987; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). For example, since Jay-Z is not named in the ad, I was only able to recognize him through my extra-textual familiarity with his face. The ad also “rhymed” with images I had seen in the past. More specifically, it recalled portraits of royalty surrounded by concubines and advisors. Finally, my decoding was shaped by the connotation of the megaphone object. Thus, the combination of my extra-textual knowledge, the positioning of the subjects, and the props of the scene leave little doubt as to who is in charge.

Figure 12: Rocawear Ads
On left: Rocawear Adults (“Rocawear Ad,” December 4, 2006)
On right: Rocawear Kids (Cookie, January 2006, p. 71)

couplet, providing just enough variation to be clever, while staying well within the proper phonetic constraints.
36 By extra-textual knowledge, I mean knowledge outside the text or information that I bring to the interpretation process.
Since I wish to consider how children’s campaigns either contrast with or conform to the visual logic of their adult counterparts, let’s compare this adult Rocawear ad to one of its children’s line equivalents (Figure 12), drawn from the January issue of *Cookie* magazine. This Rocawear Kids ad features three boys posing in front of brownstone apartments and, significantly, the same type of flood lights that we saw behind Jay-Z. While the Rocawear Kids ad has fewer explicit props connoting “music video” than we saw in the adult version, there are two common elements between the images that I would like to highlight. First is the “apple box,” a small wooden cube common on film sets and often used to boost lights and other film equipment. Whatever its physical function in these photographs, the “apple box” was originally designed to be used “behind-the-scenes,” not as a prop in front of the camera. Thus, its use in both the Rocawear campaigns strikes me as superfluous, as though there was a deliberate attempt to expose the apparatus of production. Such a gesture of transparency connotes “intimacy” and “access” to a world peopled by celebrities, but, of course, the ad delivers nothing of the sort. These photographs are carefully lit and posed—designed to cast their subjects in the most flattering light. The second element, and in my view the most powerful link between these two ads, are the models’ expressions. No one in these pictures is smiling. Also notice the slight downward tilt of the models’ heads. With the exception of the seated woman in the adult ad and the seated boy in the Rocawear Kids ad, the rest of the models are, quite literally, looking down at us. I will explore this phenomenon more in the next chapter.

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37 In the Rocawear Kids ad, the “apple box” is used to enhance the stature of the boy on the left, but his white shoe draws attention to this object that certainly doesn’t belong on the street. In the adult ad, the “apple box” is placed front and center, apparently giving the female models reason to spread their legs.
Now that we have compared these two iterations of Rocawear imagery, I would like to return to the idea of brand inheritance. I suggested earlier that, as extensions of adult campaigns, the ads for the children’s lines foreground their lineage. To wit, a Rocawear label, though sewn onto a T-shirt for ten-year-olds, still carries the indelible imprimatur of its original founder. So, if Jay-Z is positioned in the adult ad as the king of the Rocawear castle, then might the three boys pictured in the children’s ad be the symbolic heirs to his throne? Remember that, as signifiers, children are simply small people, but as signifieds, they can represent abstract ideas such as untapped potential or, quite simply, the future. Furthermore, these ads are aimed at mothers, who almost certainly harbor hopes and dreams about what their child may become when he or she grows up. According to Berger (1977), “Publicity is, in essence, nostalgic. It has to sell the past to the future.” (p. 139) I would counter that, in this case, the future is, in fact, being sold to the present through a form of vicarious consumption driven by a mother’s own ambition for her children: “Perhaps, someday, they will be as successful as Jay-Z, but why wait? The future is now.”

I contend that, by cleaving so close to the visual conventions of its adult equivalent, this print ad for Rocawear Kids creates a prolepsis for its viewers. For example, by channeling Jay-Z’s “tough” expression through the faces of child models, the photograph collapses time such that the children already embody the power and sophistication of a Rocawear adult. This image is a foretaste of what’s to come, representing the future long before it actually comes to pass. Take a closer look at the boys’ faces. There is a reason why they were hired for this job. With clean complexions and symmetrical features, they are classically handsome. Prolepsis occurs when the
child model who promises to grow up to be handsome, is at once _already_ handsome. Were they to smile, or exaggerate their posturing, we might be tempted to call them cute and they would be reduced to typical children mugging for the camera. But these boys are deadly serious. Like Jay-Z and his entourage, they are not afraid of your gaze. I will examine the power and interpersonal politics of the smile, and lack of it, in more detail later on. For the moment, suffice it to say that the unspoken message of the Rocawear Kids ad seems to be quite simple: a boy dressed like a prince is destined to be king.

**Baby Phat**

Print ad campaigns for Baby Phat Girlz also ride on the coattails of their adult predecessors. As described earlier, the Baby Phat brand revolves around the central axis of Kimora Lee who, in addition to designing and modeling the adult line, also appears alongside her own daughters—shepherding them through a series of themed tableaus featuring mansions, elaborate gardens, private jets, and other trappings of affluence. Kimora Lee and her daughters are clearly meant to inhabit the _same world_ which, in turn, seems to emulate the famous family’s oh-so-glamorous “off-camera” lifestyle. In other words, the apparent link between the brands Baby Phat and Baby Phat Girlz is also a _biological_ one, personified in an actual real-life mother-daughter relationship. And, unlike Jay-Z, this queen’s heirs are real.
A recent Baby Phat campaign places the Kimora Lee and her family in an Asian setting. When I compared the two ads (one for Baby Phat and one for Baby Phat Girlz) I noticed that both share the same backdrop: orange-tinged rice paper walls, a purple neon Baby Phat sign, vertical strips of blurred Kanji characters, a floor illuminated from below, and wooden lanterns. In the adult ad (Figure 13), Kimora Lee is standing in the center, surrounded by nine models with Asian features, some of whom are kneeling so that Kimora Lee can tower over the group. The five men are dressed in black ties and white suits—outfits striking in so far as they invert the stereotypical gangster outfit of white ties and black suits. The four women are wearing all black—from mini-skirts to leather pants to exposed bras—and some sort of eye-patch or mask which, together,

38 Kanji are Chinese characters used in logographic Japanese writing.
evoke the fetish look of the ninja/dominatrix.\textsuperscript{39} Posed in such a setting, Kimora Lee looks like a tough-as-nails Tokyo mob boss/night club owner.

![Baby Phat Girlz Ad](image)

Figure 14: Baby Phat Girlz Ad (\textit{Cookie}, January 2006, p. 55)

The Baby Phat Girlz backdrop is virtually identical (Figure 14), the only difference being the “Girlz” tag on the neon sign. The child models, Ming and Aoki, seem quite at home in such nocturnal environs, their fans unfolded, yet lowered enough to fully

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\textsuperscript{39} Long familiar in Japanese Anime, and Hong Kong action films, the ninja/dominatrix type has been recently popularized the U.S. through films such as The Matrix and Aeon Flux.
reveal their defiant faces. Unfazed by the adult world that surrounds them, these girls, like their mother, are anything but meek. It’s enough to make one wonder what roles Ming and Aoki are being groomed to assume. To wit, I once showed this ad to an Asian-American mother. When she saw it, she recoiled and exclaimed, “Ew!” She explained her visceral reaction thusly:

The background just doesn’t look good to me…you see this kind of environment in a really sleazy part of Asia…especially the neon sign…you don’t associate that sort of thing with kids…that makes me think of one of those strip clubs in Thailand—it was like ‘whoa!’ Yeah, as a mother, it’s not something that I picture kids in.” (Boulton, 2006)

![Figure 15: DKNY Ad (Vogue, November 2005, pp. 34-35)](image)

40 The Japanese folding fan (“Akomeogi”) may have a very specific meaning in its own culture, harkening back to the aristocrats of the Heian period, Shinto priests, or other formal ceremonial uses, but I suspect that these subtleties would be lost on most Americans. In the United States, a folding fan tends to be a generic pan-Asian symbol, along with Samurais and Geishas.
For another, and perhaps more straightforward, example of brand continuity between adult and children’s lines, let’s revisit the DKNY ad considered earlier (Figure 15). The most striking aspect of this image is its evocation of a newspaper. The ostensibly candid photographs appear like panes of a window, framed by off-white newsprint borders. The details are meticulously executed and include the different sized photos organized in a grid, the small paragraph of text, the casual demeanor of the models going about town, the perforations left by the printing press and, finally, the tiny black dot on the edge of the ‘newspaper’ page. 41 When I compared the DKNY ad with “On the Street,” a regular trend-spotting feature in the New York Times’ “Sunday Style” section (Figure 16), I found remarkable resemblances: same lay-out, candid photos, text, perforations etc. By explicitly referring to a New York Times institution, DKNY encodes its ad with a message more easily decoded by regular readers of the “Sunday Style” section. 42

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41 Another ad for DKNY kids, in the March/April issue of Cookie, has only a single photographic pane, but keeps the newspaper border and adds additional emphasis to the New York Times reference by adding “Times” to the DKNY header.

42 As of the summer of 2006, high fashion rival Ralph Lauren was also pursuing New York Times readers, taking out a weekly full-page ad directly opposite “On the Street.” Thus, just as we saw in Cookie, Lauren might be hoping that the “Kuleshov effect” of rapid page-turning might further blur the boundaries between his ad and the editorial content of the New York Times.
The DNKY “homage” to the New York Times is, if you will, an “in-joke” that, once explained, quickly loses its luster: do the producers of the ad really expect us to believe that the image comes from a real newspaper? Are they trying to trick us into thinking that these models are actually socialites caught unawares while wearing DNKY? Of course, many ads suffer under close scrutiny. Their internal logic, or lack thereof, seems to insult the intelligence of any rational reader. But, as Hermes (1995) has reminded us, these images are rarely so carefully considered; they are normally viewed casually and in passing. Thus, the best the advertiser can hope for is to briefly pause the hand and plant a seed of association before the page is turned. In such a split-second moment, efficiency of meaning-making is at a premium. As such, the DKNY ad accomplishes two goals in relatively short order. First, at the denotative level, the ad presents a clear display of the DKNY product line (lacey shirts and ripped jeans) just as any catalogue accessible to a general audience. Second, by quoting the visual layout signifier of “On the Street,” the ad makes a special appeal to the “cultural knowledge”
of a specific audience (New York Times readers) and, by extension, seeks to place their brand in the same category as this widely acknowledged arbiter of good taste.

Figure 17: DKNY Ad (Vogue, November 2005, pp. 34-35)

Figure 18: DKNY Kids Ad (Cookie, January 2006, pp. 10-11)
Earlier I quoted Danesi’s (2002) idea that ads tend to be “recycled signifiers, dressed up in contemporary garb” (p. 35). I would now like to contend that the power of the DKNY ad does not emanate from its force of reason, but rather its depth of *resonance*. By recycling an already established signifier, DKNY trumpets their reimagining of “On the Street” within an echo chamber of connotations. When placed before a reader with the requisite “stores of experience,” the ad reverberates with familiar “referents” and gains meaning through a constant ricochet of mental associations. As it happens, I found this ad in an issue of *Vogue* which suggests that whoever placed the ad assumes a certain overlap of audiences that subscribe to both *Vogue* and the *New York Times*. Indeed, the DKNY “adult” ad in *Vogue* with the DKNY Kids ad in *Cookie* are basically identical (Figures 17 & 18). The only notable difference between them is the age of the models.43

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43 One interesting commonality between the ads (which incidentally violates the visual convention of the Times) is that they both feature models whose head breaks the frame of the photo and overlaps part of the DKNY “headline.” Such an illusion of 3D might refer to a similar device used on the covers of magazines. Though far more subtle than the reference to “On the Street,” perhaps this visual gesture familiar to fashion glossies may resonate with a wider audience.
Kenneth Cole

Like DKNY, Kenneth Cole makes formal aesthetic connections between the ads for their adult and children’s lines. The adult ad above (Figure 19) features a blurred background of distant white walls and entrances while the model, positioned in the foreground, stands out in sharp focus. In addition to the brand name/logo embossed in white at the bottom right-hand corner, the ad features a playful rhetorical question: “If you had everything where would you put it?” In comparison, the visual structure of the children’s ad below is almost identical—only the text of the rhetorical question differs: “Do you have to fall down to grow up?” (Figure 20) Apparently, such abstract and philosophical musings are a Kenneth Cole signature. Another children’s ad in the September 2006 issue of Cookie asks, “If you let your imagination go does it return?” and an adult ad that I found online proposes a similar query: “Do you ever have nothing to lose?” (“Kenneth Cole,” December 4, 2006). What is remarkable here is that the
children’s ads seem to imply that a six-year-old is capable of such deep thoughts. This is another example of prolepsis: an adult mind already present inside the body of a child.

Figure 20: Kenneth Cole Reaction Kids Ad (Cookie, May/June 2006, p. 167)
Ralph Lauren

Ralph Lauren has made heavy investments in print advertising for designer children’s clothing, buying some of the most expensive space inside the January 2006 and September 2006 issues of *Cookie* magazine. For both issues, the brand placed two fold-out ads just inside the front cover—prime real estate for advertisers (“*Cookie Ad Rates*,” December 4, 2006). The child models are pictured amidst the barns, open fields, and white fences of the country (Figure 21). Their clothing is rugged, yet refined: rubber boots civilized by houndstooth jackets and dull corduroy tempered by colorful neckties. Just what, pray tell, are these outfits for? Visiting the stables? Hunting for foxes? Or just walking the grounds of the estate? Regardless, stuffing a toddler in so many layers of wool hardly seems practical. And that is precisely the point. Such outfits do not only display wealth through vicarious consumption (Veblen, 1899), but also require loads of *free time*. Note that none of the ads examined thus far depict children at school. On the contrary, they are shown at leisure. This particular instance places the children in the country—land which appears to be private, thus connoting the entitlement of the landed gentry. It is, in short, the children’s inheritance. The wealth of
their adult lives is already assured. They need only dress the part until their bodies catch up.

Figure 22: Diesel Ad (“Diesel,” December 4, 2006)

Diesel

But not all designer brands aspire to create children’s lines that mimic adult forms of sophistication. While Rocawear and Baby Phat present powerful celebrity personas as the ultimate goal towards which all children should aspire, Diesel undercuts the pompous poses and imperious expressions of high fashion with dramatic outbursts of emotional ecstasy (Figure 22). The adults in Diesel’s campaign “The Future: A Musical to Believe In,” are dancing in the town common and jumping in the fountain. Like naïve children, they have thrown caution and propriety to the wind. Diesel’s adults are young-at-heart, but while they frolic, the children frown. Compared to the adult campaign, The Diesel Kids ad (Figure 23) is decidedly downbeat. A group of children,
ages ranging from about four to ten years-old, lean against a fence, apparently waiting for someone to come or something to happen. They are, in short, cool, calm, and collected. Contrast this with another adult ad (Figure 23) which literally looks up the skirt of a woman wearing psychedelic cowboy boots and skipping around in a circle. The dissonance is striking. Even the colors in the children’s ad are muted, adding to the bleak, somber mood.

![Figure 23: Diesel Ads](image)

**On left:** Adult Ad (*W*, April 2005, p. 23)  
**On right:** Kids Ad (*Cookie*, January 2006, p. 29)

But just because the adult and children’s Diesel ads do not look alike, does not mean that they exist independently from each other. On the contrary, I suspect that these ads also create a prolepsis, albeit more extreme because it goes *both ways*; just as children are promoted to little adults, so the adults are *demoted* to children. The age compression works by contrasting the models’ demeanors against the taken-for-granted
connotations of their developmental lifestages. For example, if a child’s body has special access to exuberant forms of jouissance, then the more mature adult provides the mysterious, deep and introspective stuff. But Diesel wants to have it both ways. Jaded adults can pull on some funky boots, regress, and get silly. Naïve kids can cuff up retro-jeans, cop an attitude, and be James Dean for the day. Thus, Deisel adults, though sexually mature on the surface, long for internal innocence of childhood. Deisel kids, on the other hand, seek to endow their small physical frames with the appearance of worldly knowledge. In other words, adults are infantilized while children are adultified.

**Gender Displays**

As described in the introduction, the childish adult is a familiar trope, typically associated with women (Goffman, 1979). While the first Diesel ad (Figure 22) depicted jubilant adults of both genders, notice that the two men in the foreground are not exactly jumping for joy—their bodies are firmly anchored so their female dancing partners can extend their bodies in wild abandon. Thus, the men may be exerting themselves physically, but still remain in control of the situation—their free arms do not dangle or splay out but stay flexed and close to their torso. We have seen this before. Goffman (1979) describes how, through a visual ritualization of subordination, women are allowed to let down their guard, entrusting their safety to a man much as a child would to an adult (p. 5). He describes how a female model may don a wide variety of more “masculine” outfits, from doctor to business woman, but, ultimately, she is not taken seriously by the culture. The lab coat is reduced to a lark, the double-breasted suit to a fashion trend, and her professional poses are dismissed as harmless games of dress-up.
Though images depicting women in children’s clothes certainly exacerbate this problem, Goffman argues that physical demeanor is also an important cue:

The note of unseriousness struck by a childlike guise is struck by another styling of the self, this one perhaps entirely restricted to advertisements, namely, the use of the entire body as a playful gesticulative device, a sort of body clowning (p. 50).

Goffman’s purpose is not to reign in the emotions of women, or impose some sort of prohibition against goofy postures. Instead, he trains his analysis on how the seemingly innocuous advertisements of everyday ritualize the display of gender. Thus, the ads do not reflect reality, but idealize it, creating impossible goals that we all might strive to achieve. The problem lies in how the rules of gender display grant certain liberties of expression to women and children, while subordinating them both to the protection of men.\textsuperscript{45} Take, for example, the cover of Cookie’s premier issue (Figure 24). The photo features a young mother in her pajamas bouncing on a hotel bed with her son. Now try to imagine a father in the place of the mother. Or, for that matter, a man skipping around a circle. Would these images still work?\textsuperscript{46} I doubt it.

\textsuperscript{44} The woman in the white pants and white wig is not only kicking her knee high into the air—thus entirely relying on the man for balance—but she is also wearing the same psychedelic boots that we see skipping around a circle in the second ad (Figure 24).

\textsuperscript{45} Much of popular culture reinforces Cyndi Lauper’s declaration that “Girls just want to have fun.” At first blush, this sounds great—like a prolonged adolescence—until marketers insist that even full-grown women don’t really want power, they just want to be girls. The message seems to be: “Relax! Shop for clothes, play with the kids, indulge yourself and let the men do the work.” Though often couched in “feminist” language of empowerment, these messages are stealth weapons in the arsenal of patriarchy, threatening to put women “back in their place.”

\textsuperscript{46} By “work,” I mean resonate in the culture by affirming established expectations around appropriate gender behavior.
In this chapter, I examined the relationship between ads for adult and children’s clothing of the same brand. I described how the campaigns attempt to associate the adult line with a desired lifestyle, then extend the meaning to the children’s line using images that, while not exact replicas of the adult ads, nonetheless contain visual tropes that rhyme with the original referent: Rocawear Kids refers to Jay-Z, Baby Phat Girlz implies Kimora Lee, DKNY mimics the New York Times and so on. I argued that the end result of such chains of signification is a prolepsis: the fashion-forward child depicted as an adult-in-waiting. Mothers are invited to view the pricy vestments as affirmation of the king or queen that is already inside their child and just waiting to
come out. Diesel goes further by not only elevating kids to a higher level of maturity, but also letting adults slide down into the playground from whence they came. But, as Goffman reminds us, women have long been depicted as existing in both places at once. The next chapter will consider a notable exception to this trend—an arena that actually poses women models as both serious and powerful adults. I will argue that these facial expressions of dominance are beginning to trickle down to younger models—both girls and boys alike.
CHAPTER 5

FACIAL EXPRESSION

Of all the things you wear, your expression is the most important.

~Anonymous Proverb

The previous chapter examined how advertising campaigns for designer clothing can connect their adult and children’s lines through a prolepsis of visual association. This chapter will consider another aspect of this relationship, namely how the child models are often posed with very adult-like expressions. Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach to social interaction, I describe how the actors in these images perform their internal character through an external “front” of direct address, slight downward head-tilts, and faces void of emotion. I argue that these ads are best understood as mediated forms of social interaction and suggest that both their construction, and reception, operate within the visual referent systems of everyday life.

I drew my sample of print ads for designer children’s clothing from the first five issues of Cookie magazine published in 2006. I favored national brands with adult equivalents that depicted very “mature” modes of address. For example, I was most interested in ads where the child model looked out at the viewer without smiling. To get a general idea of how often this occurred, I conducted a rough content analysis of two issues of the magazine: January 2006 and September 2006. Of the 26 full page ads for children’s clothing in the first issue, 18 had at least one child model staring straight

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47 This quote is often attributed to Janet Layne, a model who once posed nude in Playboy magazine.
back at the camera and 14 had at least one child model who was not smiling. Moreover, 10 ads featured at least one child model who was both looking at the camera and not smiling. The September issue yielded similar results. Out of a total of 40 full page ads, 24 had a child in direct address, 27 had a child not smiling, and 16 had a child looking out at the viewer without a smile.

I argued above that ad campaigns for a single designer clothing brand often seek to create visual rhymes between the children’s and adult lines. In this case, the relationship is sequential: first came the adult clothing and accompanying brand identity which, in turn, gave birth to the children’s extension. This is not only the chronology of manufacture, but likely the experience of consumption, as these ads are directed at mothers who presumably have their own brand allegiances and are now shopping for their children. Thus, print ads for designer children’s clothing necessarily operate within the bounds of an already existing referent system. I will now contend that one of the fundamental visual tropes of designer fashion is the display of social status through facial expression. I suspect that, at this level, it is not enough for models to be beautiful—they must also communicate an attitude of domination. This can be achieved on a symbolic level by mastering the gaze of the camera through an expression of deep self-regard. As we shall see in the photo essay that follows In comparing ads for both the adult and children’s line, I found that such self-awareness strikes a very mature pose.
Figure 25: Rocawear Ads
On left: Adult Ad ("Rocawear Ad 2," December 4, 2006)
On right: Kids Ad (Cookie, September 2006, p. 73)
Figure 26: Sean John Ads
On left: Sean John Ad ("Diddy," December 4, 2006)
On right: Young Moguls Ad (Cookie, September 2006, p. 15)
Both the Rocawear and Rocawear kids ad (Figure 25) depict a single black female wearing fur and an ever-so-slight smile. Though they appear in separate places (online and in Cookie magazine), they remain in close relationship, with the latter built upon the visual template of the former. In other words, the adult ad establishes the identity of the brand as a form of visual currency which, in turn, ads value to the children’s ad. There are many symbols that reinforce this relationship, ranging from the logo and style of clothing to the physical resemblance among models. But I wish to argue that the transaction of meaning between adult and children’s designer clothing ads is also based on similar forms of facial expression. To that end, I have superimposed the adult model’s face on the child’s body to illustrate the semiotic process of prolepsis, whereby the image of the child refers to images of adults and thus presents the child’s future as already present. As you can see, the mode of address, head tilt, and confident expression that the models hold in common makes this visual transfer almost seamless.

As for the Sean John ads (Figure 26), the name of the children’s line says it all: “Young Moguls.” Sean John “Diddy” Combs, a hip hop entrepreneur whose net worth is valued at $346 million dollars (“Richest in Hip-Hop,” December 4 2006), is the founder of the label and the central image of the brand. I compared a picture of the “real” Sean Combs from his website with one of a series of “Young Moguls” ads in the September 2006 issue of Cookie magazine. Sean John is wearing sunglasses, frowning, and holding a cigar. The central character in the “Young Moguls” ad, apparently a younger version of Sean John himself, is also wearing sunglasses, frowning, and holding a toothpick in his mouth. Why the toothpick? It’s unlikely that such a prop was used for its denotative meaning—a wooden tool for cleaning teeth. I suspect that it was
added for its *connotation* of toughness.\(^{48}\) To further inflate the boy’s importance, he is placed in front of a private jet, flanked by security guards. The other ads in the “Young Moguls” series feature similar scenes of power and prestige: the same boy model holding court in a boardroom, being served by a butler, and proudly posing in an oil painting. In this case, superimposing Sean Combs’ head over the boy’s body almost seems beside the point. To sum up, both the Rocawear and Sean John campaigns connect the child models to their adult equivalents through visual cues of direct address, head tilts, and facial expressions.

**Impression Management**

Why does facial expression matter? Goffman (1959) argues that the transfer of complex meanings often occurs through interpersonal, and silent, forms of communication. As a social anthropologist, he has helped turn the attention of his discipline away from the exotic “other” and inward towards the familiar: “We tend to blind ourselves to the fact that everyday secular performances in our own Anglo-American society must often pass a strict test of aptness, fitness, propriety, and decorum” (p. 55). One key component of these “unwritten rules” is the continual process of “impression management” whereby we perform the role of an idealized self which foregrounds certain qualities and conceals others (p. 248-49). Conversely, we read others through a set of similar cues—a sort of visual short-hand based on past experiences—in order to infer expectations about their future behavior.\(^{49}\) Thus, the

\(^{48}\) In gangster films, Italian street thugs were often shown with a toothpick in their mouth—a stereotype which has been lampooned by Roberto Benigni in *Johnny Toothpick* (1991) and Robert DeNiro in *Analyze This!* (1999).

\(^{49}\) For example, when evaluating potential hires, employers must extrapolate from very limited data, often discarding cover letters with typos and eliminating those candidates who dress too casually for an
actors in this drama typically interpret scripts already known to their audience and the resulting “impressions” tell a story, set the scene, and establish the terms of engagement. Such performances need not be explicit or intentional. Indeed, most have been rendered quite invisible through repeated use. Nevertheless, Goffman insists that social interaction is performed according to specific cultural codes and conventions. In short, we manage how we appear to others through “personal fronts” (pp. 22-24).

According to Goffman, the “personal front” consists of three key elements: setting, appearance, and manner. Setting is the stage for the performance, the furniture and décor of the location. For example, ads for Ralph Lauren Kids might depict a summer house in the Hamptons while Rocawear Kids places its child models on the streets of Brooklyn. Appearance includes clothing which demarcates rank or social station. Just as military uniforms boast insignias of honor and distinction, a conspicuous label like Baby Phat Girlz sends a dual-message of wealth and good taste. Manner is the turnkey of the “personal front.” For performances to work—that is, be interpreted as intended—people must behave in a manner that is appropriate to both their setting and appearance. If not, the resulting faux pas will expose the actor as an imposter. For instance, a prince may don the rags of a pauper and pass among the people of the village, but his stilted speech patterns and imperious bearing will soon give him away.

interview. Does this mean that all jobs require champion spellers and expensive wardrobes? Of course not. Nonetheless, proof-reading and formal dress demonstrate a knowledge of, and obedience to, the rules of the game. Failure to conform to these specific conventions sends a strong signal of general incompetence.

50 William James has observed that we all strike distinct postures according to our circumstance: “Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his ‘tough’ young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our customers as to our laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends.” (quoted in Goffman, 1959, pp. 48-49)
Print advertisements, on the other hand, may offer a detailed presentation of *setting* and *appearance*, but limit *manner* to a mere instant of posture, gesture, and facial expression—the child models will never have to speak or behave in public, they only need *pose*. Their “impressions” are managed through manipulation, like mannequins in a store, then perpetually frozen in an idealized display of identity.

Goffman’s central point is this: when we enter a social situation, we must make a split-second evaluation of the roles and relationships of the various players involved. In other words, we rely heavily on the *manner* in which others behave in order to determine their relative power (p. 75). What are the potential threats and/or benefits of the interaction? Do they conform to, or rebel against, established norms? Since our instantaneous assessments of strangers must necessarily extrapolate from the various “fronts” of their performance, our conclusions tend to be stereotypical and only partially accurate (p. 252). Take eye contact. Depending on the culture, looking down while addressing an elder could be a sign of either respect or insolence. Thus, regardless of actual intent, a simple tilt of the head can change the very meaning of an interaction just as a smile that is polite at a wedding might be rude at a funeral.

**Para-Proxemics**

I wish to argue that the print advertisements under consideration in this study engage in an interpersonal, albeit brief, symbolic exchange with their audience. More specifically, the relationship between the depicted subjects (child models) and hailed viewers (affluent mothers) is one which Meyrowitz (1986) has described as “para-proxemic”—a form of mediated body language analogous to everyday social interaction. As mentioned above, Meyrowitz posits that television, by breaking the
action into distinct shots of various distance, is able to approximate the intimacies of real life. For example, a wide shot suggests emotional distance, while a close-up implies a relationship of trust.\(^51\) Similarly, and perhaps more widely recognized, is the use of a low-angle which can simulate a child’s point of view, thus imbuing the other actor with superior strength or authority (p. 269).\(^52\) Of course, these mediated images are necessarily flat and only approximate social interaction such that any actual threats or benefits are safely mediated through the protective glass of the television screen (p. 270). This is to say that para-proxemic interactions only occur on a symbolic level. The images are encoded with connotative meanings meant to access our referent systems of daily life.

One of the most consistent para-proxemic devices in these ads is the use of direct address: most of the child-models stare directly into the camera. How are we to interpret this look? Following Meyrowitz’s lead, we might consider these representations as analogues to actual social interaction. In other words, what might these images mean were they experienced as three-dimensional realities? Two scenarios come to mind. First, we might imagine the actual photo shoot. On a denotative level, the children fully regard their photographers and thus appear to be observing their own

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\(^{51}\) Hall (1966) describes how, in Western culture, physical distances between people in face-to-face interaction reflect degrees of formality ranging from intimate (up to 18 inches) to public (12-25 feet). Meyrowitz (1986) argues that interpersonal behavior preceded, and therefore is the referent system for, media: “A shout in real experience has one meaning at 25 feet and quite another at 25 inches; a ‘member of the opposite sex’ has one meaning at 5 feet and another at 5 inches” (p. 268).

\(^{52}\) Meyrowitz (1986) reminds us that these devices can achieve divergent effects by either going with or against the viewer’s expectations: “A production variable [has] no inherent meaning apart from the portrayed content and relevant social context. A low angle shot, for example, might be understood in one way when picturing a judge or politician (people who are “looked up to” in real life) and another way when picturing a young boy or a waiter. A low angle shot may in one case enhance credibility and in another cause uneasiness, mistrust, or fear. Again, the real-life matrix of meaning provides the framework for perception and response.” (p. 269)
observation. And if we reference our day-to-day “store of experience,” the models’ eye-contact seems to connote their consent to the capture of their own image—otherwise, they would surely shield their face, or turn away. Moreover, the models’ complicity in the production process requires a pose intended not for the family photo album, but rather a wide audience of total strangers. And while many of the models may be too young to fully comprehend their impending fame, the cumbersome apparatus of the crew (ie: dressing room, professional lighting equipment, huddle of adults behind the lens, etc.) makes this particular “performance” a singular event: basking in the glare of the spotlight, these kids are hamming it up for the crowd. The second scenario is more akin to Meyrowitz’s analysis of television and requires a suspension of disbelief. In this case, the lights, camera, and action fade away leaving only the image of a child, often alone, looking straight at us. As Meryrowitz puts it, echoing Goffman (1959), such a para-proxemic interaction invites the viewer to quickly index visual cues in order to judge “whether the situation is formal or informal, who is in charge, whom he [or she] must speak to first, and whether he [or she] is welcome or unwelcome” (p. 263). Of these two scenarios, the former requires much more work than the latter. As such, I doubt that many readers of Cookie magazine would go to the trouble of actually imagining the photo shoot where the image was produced. Of course, this is speculation on my part, but is nonetheless a key assumption of my analysis. In other words, I suspect that most viewers flipping through magazine advertisements

53 Though portraits featuring direct address are a common trope in fashion advertisements, it is by no means the only option. Many ads feature models whose attention is entirely focused on something else, giving the allusion that the photographer caught them unawares.
would make snap judgements based on the visual cues of para-proxemic interaction. I will now describe two important cues that appear in ads for designer children’s clothing: head tilt and facial expression.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) urge us to consider the perspective of images that we view in order that we might understand what it would take to simulate these particular points of view in everyday life:

> Even when their origins are not shown, viewpoints can always be related to concrete situations. One can, and perhaps should, always ask ‘Who could see this scene in this way?’ ‘Where would one have to be to see this scene this way, and what sort of person would one have to be to occupy that space?’ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 149)

In real life, adults most often observe children from above. But in the 26 children’s clothing ads in the premiere issue of *Cookie* magazine (January 2006), the vast majority depicted children facing the camera with their heads in a neutral position or tilted slightly downward. In other words, almost all of the child models are not only looking straight-out, but also straight-ahead, as though addressing a peer of similar stature. This is especially significant since our referent system of actual social interactions tends to place adults as “higher up” than children both literally (height) and figuratively (rank).

In order to “get down to their level,” we must sit, crouch, or kneel. And that is exactly what the photographer did on the set of a recent Rocawear photo shoot (Figure 27):

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54 I am not suggesting that family photos have a unique claim on authenticity. Indeed, as Goffman (1959) argues, we are constantly performing our identities to others through “personal fronts.” The difference I wish to emphasize is that of reach and scale.

55 To put a finer point on the power of eye level, we need only recall the thrill most children take in being placed on a pedestal where they might occupy their parents’ airspace. Being taller may offer a whole host of privileges in our society, but the ability to look another directly in the eye is surely one of the most central. Conversely, no one likes to be “looked down on.”
Rocawear is not alone. Many other designer brands choose this low angle in order to attain a certain “look.” When reviewing the website for Jet Set Kids, a child modeling agency, I saw plenty of other child fashion photographers genuflecting at their models’ feet (Figure 28):
Some ads went beyond eye-line parity. For example, the above Rocawear Kids ad places the viewer on the level of the boy seated in the foreground. Consequently, the two boys standing in the background gaze down at us rather ominously. The Kenneth Cole ads considered in the introduction of this report also exhibit a slight downward tilt of the head. By positioning the viewer below the child models, the Rocawear and Kenneth Cole ads elevate the child models and thus exaggerate their relative strength and power. Like a “special effect” which tricks the eye in order to make a normal person look like a giant, these ads not only increase the child models relative height, they also make a para-proxemic appeal to the connotative meaning of literally “looking up” to someone of superior rank.

Rocawear and Kenneth Cole are the exceptions, not the rule. Nevertheless, they help guide us to the heart of the matter. Most of the ads that I analyzed depicted a direct eye-line placing the viewer on the same level as the child model. But, when considered as a para-proxemic device, there is nothing neutral about an eye-level camera angle. For example, if looking down dominates and looking up submits, then an aligned gaze suggests a relationship of equality. Remember that the intended audience for these ads
are young mothers (age 25-34). By stripping away the more realistic adult view which typically comes from above, these ads lift children up into an imaginary world where adults and children regard each other as equals. My central point is this: though real-life fashion photographers and daycare providers alike may show occasionally show respect to children by bending a knee, these ads do not humble adults—they promote children to a higher station in life.

A skeptic might say, “But virtually all children’s portraits are done at eye-level!” There are three problems with this objection. First, many portraits of children, school pictures in particular, favor a more intimate close-up framing (head, neck, and shoulders) which focuses primarily on the face. Whereas the ads under consideration are mostly full body shots (featuring the designer clothing) which recall snapshots from a family vacation—photos typically taken from the angle most convenient to the amateur photographer behind the lens or the height of a standing adult. This is precisely what makes these advertisements so unusual. They combine full-body shots of children within an unusual environment (family vacation) with an eye-level “flattering angle” (formal portraiture). Second, even if we place these images in the family vacation category, most are missing a key element: the family itself. With the exception of Baby Phat Girlz and DKNY Kids, there are no adults in these ads. The children appear alone, apparently unsupervised, a picture of self-sufficiency and independence. Third, over half of the child models in my set of designer children’s clothing ads are not smiling. The three boys in the Rocawear ad glower down at us, their arched eyebrows connoting vague hints of hostility. The models in the Diesel Kids ad (unlike their adult counterparts) cast vacant looks into the distance, apparently bored out of their minds.
Thus, the *manner* of these child models defies one of the most common conventions in photography: “Smile for the camera!” So what, pray tell, would make such macho and world-weary postures fashionable? To answer this question, we must trace the rise, and fall, of the smile in Western visual culture.

**A Brief History of the Smile**

Trumble (2004) reminds us that contemporary photography’s signature expression of the broad, toothy grin only became de rigueur through a gradual confluence of technological and cultural change. In the nineteenth century, family photographs were a tedious affair. Subjects traveled to a professional studio and were forced to stay perfectly still for extended periods of time—a process not unlike sitting for a painted portrait. As a result, expressions were often dour. Schroeder (1998) adds that school pictures were grim and even more informal settings like picnics often produced solemn looks and (p. 131). He traces this somber tendency back to the negative connotations attached to the smile already established by the visual tropes of fine art and popular illustration:

> Smiles, especially tooth-exposing smiles, are class-related. The smiling subjects are variously not in control of their expressions; they are innocents like children and peasants; madmen, seniles, drunks, outcasts, people lost in passions of lust, greed, power, chicanery, cruelty; and at the fundament, they are barely human. (p. 110)

Berger (1977) noticed a similar theme in seventeenth century oil painting:

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56 Early cameras had to keep the aperture open in order to expose the film to sufficient light. If the subject moved, they risked blurring the image.

57 Even if the photography subject wished to appear happy, holding a smile for sixty seconds or more would have been no easy task. Thus, when modern audiences look at the pictures of Lewis Hine, who documented child labor in the early twentieth century, they might focus on the children’s seemingly sad expressions. But since a serious face was the convention at the time, Hines portraits likely achieved their impact not through the faces of the children, but rather through their physical *placement* amidst such dangerous environments as textile factories and coal mines.
The painted poor smile as they offer what they have for sale. (They smile showing their teeth, which the rich in pictures never do.) They smile at the better-off—to ingratiate themselves, but also at the prospect of a sale or a job. (p. 104)

Furthermore, the only documented smile in American nineteenth-century illustration art was that of Huckleberry Finn, who, as a poor peasant child, only further confirms Schroeder’s (1998) thesis as to what class of society could smile and why (p. 121). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that smiling for portraits was generally frowned upon by society’s elite (p. 116). But by the 1920’s, inexpensive portable cameras (and faster exposure times) enabled the masses to catch more jovial expressions on film (p. 131). Concurrently, the beaming smiles of silver screen idols such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks helped glamorize the grin and loosen the lips of their fans (p. 135). In this way, slowly but surely, the connotation of the smile in American culture began to shift.

Kotchemidova (2005) contends that the smiling standard for pictures was further cemented through a corporate public relations strategy. The Kodak camera company published countless manuals and journals that courted new customers by promoting the

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58 Pickford and Fairbanks were the perfect intermediaries for this cultural transformation of the smile. In other words, they could get away with it since Pickford was consistently cast as the spunky adolescent and Douglas Fairbanks the swashbuckling rascal. Together, “their attractive smiles were those sanctioned by childhood innocence and the ‘owtlawry’ of a free spirit” (Schroeder, 1998, p. 135).

59 Quicker shutter speeds and the emulation of movie stars are only part of the explanation for the aesthetic and cultural transformation of the smile. Schroeder (1998) argues that the development of dentistry and orthodontics also helped to promote white, aligned teeth and, thus, their proud display. He also notes how advertisements for dental care products further multiplied public images of attractive models sporting toothy grins.
practice of photography. One of the more ingenious gimmicks used contests to reward and publicize amateur snaps depicting the joys of photography—the panels of hand-picked judges overwhelmingly favored pictures featuring smiling subjects (p. 15). Thus, in a coordinated campaign, Kodak worked tirelessly to shed the stiff, crusty cocoon of formal portraits for more candid, casual, and frequent photos. In this way, the camera became the essential accessory to leisure and pleasure, the chronicler of shiny happy faces. Of course, as Goffman (1959) reminds us, actual lived experiences do not always correspond with our own preferred self-perceptions. Thus, according to Kotchemidova (2005), the Kodak formula lives on: “No matter how bored we are at a social gathering, we always smile for the picture” (p. 21).

Ekman (1997; 2003) would likely classify the obligatory smile for the camera as the “Pan American” type, a voluntary effort of politeness which mirrors the “painted on” smile of the insincere host. According to Ekman, the more spontaneous, and therefore genuine, smile would be the “Duchenne,” easily recognized by the squint around the eyes which eventually create rays of wrinkles sometimes referred to as “laughing lines” or “crow’s feet.” His central point is that facial expressions of emotion may be an involuntary and universal product of our evolution, but the social conventions governing their display remain culturally specific. For example, smiles can be either revealed, disguised, or even faked. Put another way, since real felt emotions do not always correspond to the facial expressions displayed, the traditional smile for the camera is, in essence, a performance of emotion. To wit, family photos

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60 Kodak was uniquely positioned to impose a standard on the industry. Kodak pioneered and monopolized all the stages of photography, from the manufacture of the cameras to the development of the film.
often serve as the permanent record of significant events and so, regardless of how they may be feeling at the moment, most “suck it up” and smile to avoid going down in history as the unhappy member of the party.\

It would seem that we all manage the outward manifestations of our inner emotions to maintain our “personal fronts.” But, as I described in the introduction, Western culture participates in a hyper-ritualization of gender such that men tend to be depicted as dominant and vigilant while women are often pictured as passive and vulnerable. In the context of this set of power relations, smiles take on a connotative meaning of submission:

Smiles, it can be argued, often function as ritualistic mollifiers, signaling that nothing agonistic is intended or invited, that the meaning of the other’s act has been understood and found acceptable, that, indeed, the other is approved and appreciated….smiles, then, seem more the offering of an inferior than a superior. In any case, it appears that in cross-sex encounters in American society, women smile more, and more expansively, than men (Goffman, 1979, p. 48).

Goffman’s hypothesis is supported by extensive psychological research. Laboratory studies have shown that smiling often communicates deference to authority and is expressed more often by women than men (Deutsch, 1990; Hecht & LaFrance, 1998; LaFrance & Hecht, 2000). After considering two meta-analytic literature reviews,

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62 Of course, depending on the desired impression, some might choose to “go against the grain” and not smile in order to stand out from the crowd. Also, there are probably wide variations in the social mores of expression. As my account focuses on Western Culture, I make no attempt to account for other social systems. I tend to agree with Ekman’s (1997; 2003) assertion that emotional expressions are similar across cultures (i.e: a frown always means unhappy) but their appropriate display is determined by local traditions.
63 In a series of job interview scenarios, Deutsch (1990) found that her subjects (n=80) smiled more while in the role of the applicant (low power) and less as the interviewer (high power). And when controlling for gender, Deutsch observed that the women interviewers were more accommodating to their applicants, consistently smiling more than their male equivalents (p. 531). Deutsch’s results were confirmed eight years later in a similar study by Hecht and LaFrance (1998) who not only found that “Women smiled
Hall (1998) concurs, but cautions against any sort of biological determinism which conceives of women as naturally cheery and passive. On the contrary, Hall suggests that such behavior is “tertiary” and therefore more likely to be learned through socialization rather than hardwired at birth (p. 171).

Cline and Spender (1987), in an earlier, more qualitative work, concur that “above all, it is only women who make a job out of emotional work in the cause of faithfully and flatteringly endorsing male authority” (p. 106). They argue that men—regardless of relative social rank—tend to maintain serious expressions, while smiling is all but mandatory for women such that the “weary cheery” must engage in “daily acts of deference” (pp. 97, 105). In the late 1970’s, Hochschild (2003) published what has become one of the most influential studies on “emotional labor.” She conducted an ethnography among female flight attendants and found that, as part of their job, they were expected to comfort passengers by acting as though they were happy all of the time: “This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p. 7). The smile was thus used as an asset to smother any professionally inconvenient flairs of temper. For Hochschild, the smile is a passive gesture symbolizing a willingness to adapt to others’ needs and is disproportionately required of female employees (p. 165).  

more than men overall” but that this was likely due to “the license given to high-power people to smile when they are so inclined and the obligation for low-power people to smile regardless of how positive they feel” (p. 132).

Hochschild’s analysis is by no means limited to the airline industry. As Cline and Spender (1987) point out, “Roughly half the women who work have jobs that call for this kind of emotional labor. These jobs are mainly in the service sector where there is enormous emphasis on deference. These occupations include secretaries who maintain cheerful offices; waitresses who create congenial eating atmospheres; the caring, nurturing, supportive posts of nurses, health workers, librarians and teachers.” (p. 105) So, whether it’s a charming waitress absorbing the abuse of the cook, a doting nurse doing damage control for the gruff surgeon, or the kindly teacher protecting her students from the wrath of the principal, women
Moreover, while women are expected to smile, men are under no obligation to reciprocate.\footnote{65 The tragic irony is that women are often punished when they successfully fill the social role for which they have been trained. According to New York Image consultant Carolyn Gustafson, “Even smile advocates [who claim smiling can relieve stress] admit that those who do it too much are revealing not their sweetness, but their weakness….Research has shown that women who smile a lot in business are perceived by men to be less businesslike, less powerful or authoritative” (quoted in Jacobs, 1993, pp. 199-200).}

**Indecent Expressions**

It may seem, at first blush, as though the symbolic meaning of the smile has changed dramatically over time, but one theme has remained constant: weakness. Whether ridiculed as an indelicate expression of the common people or performed by corporate shills who unwittingly tow, and thus promote, the Kodak product line, the smile has been feminized as a sign of passivity. Power, in turn, is reserved for those, typically men, who exercise their option *not* to smile. Recall Schroeder’s (1998) argument that, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, those who smiled were considered as “not in control of their expressions; they [were] innocents like *children*” (my emphasis, p. 110). Today, the connotation persists in the hyper-ritualization of the childish woman who is all too willing to yield to a man while cheerfully inviting his gaze. But what if she said “no?” What if, instead of smiling, she cast her steely gaze directly into the camera and confronted her hailed viewer with a vacant look, utterly devoid of hospitality? What if she *looked* like a man? We have already seen the result. It is “haute couture.”

“Haute couture” is a French term which can be literally translated as “high sewing.” Often confused with the less prestigious “prêt-à-porter” (“ready-to-wear” or “off-the-rack”), haute couture attire is one-of-a-kind and custom-tailored to the runway are constantly expected to counter-balance men in superior positions by providing the appropriate social lubrication for interpersonal transactions.
model’s specifications. As such, haute couture collections are rarely sold, but instead paraded in public in an attempt to set trends and enhance the reputation of the fashion house, which in-turn pursues profit through the distribution of the mass-produced prêt-à-porter lines. Although primarily based in Paris, the logic of the haute couture system can be witnessed in the United States during the culture’s annual star-gazing media event, the Academy Awards. Designers traditionally gift a unique dress to a celebrity, with the expectation that it will be prominently displayed on the red carpet, then analyzed incessantly by an entire constellation of glossy magazines. The cost of the dresses is more than off-set by the free publicity for the designers’ names, which drives sales for their mass produced off-the-rack lines. But there is one key difference between the red carpet of Hollywood and the catwalks of Paris. While celebrities flash gleaming smiles towards the sea of cameras and adoring fans, haute couture models stare straight ahead, wearing an expression of utter indifference to the crowd. For example, Kristen McMenamy, whose “icy, hard-edged, eyebrowless gaze” makes her one of the “reigning stare-masters” of high fashion, once said in an interview that, when marching down the runway, she looks out at the audience and thinks, “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you” (Jacobs, 1993, pp. 199, 200). Perhaps, then, it’s no coincidence that both “haute” and “haughty” derive from the same etymological root.66

Given what we know about the history of gender and expression, why would women be allowed to strut with such serious expressions in public? According to Harris (1993) it all happened quite by accident. Hand-drawn illustrations dominated fashion

66 According to the Miriam-Webster Dictionary, both “haute” and “haughty” can be traced back to the Anglo-French word “haut” which means “high,” from the Latin word “altus.”
advertising long after the advent of photography. As a result, the model was more like an anonymous mannequin, sketched out with a proud posture and aristocratic face:

Glamour once resided so emphatically in the stance of the model that the faces of the illustrations cannot really be said to have had expressions at all but angles or tilts—the chin raised upwards in a haughty look; the eyes lowered in an attitude of introspection; the head cocked at an inquisitive or coquettish angle; or the profile presented in sharp outline, emanating power and severity like an emperor’s bust embossed on a Roman coin….conventions of rigidity and blankness that arose from the association of fashion with graphically imprecise drawings linger on as remnants of this older tradition. (Harris, 1993, p. 134)

Thus, when walking the runway, female models were given permission not to smile when gazed upon. I would like to argue that such expressions were not blank, but a clear statement of toughness. For example, let’s fast-forward to the 1990’s. “Heroin chic” may have gained notoriety for its emaciated models, but much of its power came from the withering gaze of Kate Moss. In an article for the now defunct women’s magazine *Mademoiselle*, Jacobs (1993) proclaims that “for a new crop of models and image-makers, the only possible pose for the 90’s is being defiantly down at the mouth….Moss smiling is simply not as cool as Moss sulking” (p. 199-200). Thus, having been first established through the imagination of illustrators, then consecrated on the runway, the haughty “vacant” look of the haute couture mode is now a key signifier operating within the reference system of designer fashion. Moreover, full-grown female models do it all the time, but what happens when kids get in on the act?

I have argued above that photographs depicting child models in eye-level direct address form a para-proxemic relationship with their audiences. With such images

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67 It is tempting to speculate as to why fashion was so slow to adopt photographic representation. One plausible explanation would be that designers were not altogether interested in realism, per se. After all, drawings could be unfettered by ragged hemlines or even the anatomical constraints of flesh-and-blood models. Harris (1993) argues that the genre even developed a signature pose, more closely resembling th
invoking the conventions of social interaction, the culturally appropriate response would be some sort of greeting or acknowledgement such as a friendly—ergo smiling—facial expression. The removal of such a gesture does not create a blank or neutral “personal front,” but rather an unmitigated stare which is not only rude, it is a provocation. For Harris (1993), such a confrontational look is now familiar in women’s fashion magazines and comes from “models so confident of their own mystique that they seem to despise what the reader herself values highly, the so called ‘male gaze’” (p. 132). Paul Messaris (1997) adds that print advertisements posing women with such masculine expressions of gravitas evoke old hierarchies of class:

The supercilious expressions on the models’ faces serve to increase the desirability of what they’re selling by evoking status anxiety in the viewer….By looking down on their viewers, the models in high fashion ads offer reassurance that the world displayed in the ad is indeed superior to the one inhabited by the upwardly mobile consumer. (p. 40)

In this way, the look both invites envy while refusing to acknowledge the attention that it generates. For Berger (1977), high fashion aspires to transcend commerce in the pursuit of art—leaving the plane of mere mortals and entering the pantheon of the gods where they might gaze down on humanity with detached bemusement. But such heavenward flights of fancy are inevitably pulled back into orbit as even the most über-super-models remain caught in the gravitational field of their admirers. Not only must they continually make cameos in the mass media, they must perform a convincing
dainty prance of “a woman slightly off-center, lurching on a perpetually shifting axis that causes her to use her arms and legs to maintain an uneasy equilibrium” (p. 134).

Just as boxing and wrestling matches often begin by placing the contenders nose-to-nose in a face-off of mutual intimidation, many a bar fight has started with the words, “What are you lookin’ at?!” This is because staring without a smile is often interpreted as either a sexual come-on or a challenge. Meyrowitz’s (1986) argues that para-proxemic relationships may not be as direct as face-to-face interactions, but they are equivalent: “we respond to the idea of intimacy or aggression” (my emphasis, p. 270). Therefore, Kate Moss may be beautiful, but she demands, and holds, our attention with her bold, vacant stare.
“personal front” of almost unimaginable bliss—a resource which is necessarily limited to the precious few:

Being envied is a solitary form of assurance. It depends precisely upon not sharing your experience with those who envy you. You are observed with interest but you do not observe with interest—if you do, you will become less enviable….The power of the glamorous resides in their supposed happiness….It is this which explains the absent, unfocused look of so many glamour images. They look out over the looks of envy which sustain them. (author’s emphasis, Berger, 1977, p. 133)

Many scholars (Ferguson, 1983; Holland, 2004; Millum, 1975) have proposed that, in commercial photography, the absence of smiling is a key component of sexy facial expressions. I would go further and suggest that designer clothing advertisements with non-smiling children in eye-level direct address imply a certain sexual maturity and self-awareness. When facing the camera, these child models are neither bashful nor goofy—they are cool. With their emotions firmly under control, they display a self-assured, haute couture-style expression that says: “Yes, I know I’m beautiful, but don’t expect me to smile because I don’t need your approval.” Of course, it is unlikely that these child models are, in real life, any more arrogant and jaded than other kids. Rather, they have been carefully coached by a team of professional image makers. The result is a pose of adulthood—a “personal front” ripe with connotations typically reserved for mature audiences only.

In the photo essay that follows, I have extracted head shots from print ads for the same designer brand (adult version on the left, child version on the right) and included the full ads at the bottom of the page for reference. When you view the images, pay particular attention to the faces of both the adult and child models. As Messaris (1998)

69 These ads may not be as controversial as the “kiddie porn” of Calvin Klein, yet they too are selling attractive images of children to adults.
puts it, many images make their implied selling propositions through the visual construction of a very particular *look*:

When it comes to advertising as a whole, it is probably the nature of the spokesperson’s gaze, together with his or her general facial expression, that plays the most important role among the various attentional cues that are directly modeled on real-world behavior….we tend to be especially responsive to visual cues coming from relatively narrow zones encompassing their eyes and mouths. (p. 23).
Figure 29: Ralph Lauren Ads
On top right: Kids Ad (Cookie, January 2006, front fold-out)
On bottom right: Kids Ad (Cookie, September 2006, front fold-out)
Figure 30: Rocawear Ads
On right: Kids Ad (Cookie, January 2006, p. 71)

Figure 31: Baby Phat Ads
On left: Adult Ad (“Baby Phat 1,” December 4, 2006)
On right: Girlz Ad (Cookie, January 2006, p. 55)
In the Ralph Lauren head shots (Figure 29), there may be superficial similarities between the adult and child models—a dangling wisp of blond hair or a French beret-like hat—but what interests me is the degree of self-control exhibited in all of their facial expressions. The women appear more practiced in the bold, haughty stare while the girls seem to be suppressing their smiles—but these young amateurs will soon be grown-up professionals. After all, they already demonstrate considerable poise, confidently addressing the camera at eye-level. And, if we consider the career trajectories of Lindsey Lohan (signed by the Ford Modeling Agency at age three) along with her younger siblings (models at the 2005 Child magazine fashion show), the children in the Ralph Lauren ads have futures that look very bright indeed. This is, in essence, the function of prolepsis. By visually rhyming these children with their adult equivalents, these print ads invite the viewer to infer that these cute girls on the right are, to paraphrase Goffman (1979, p. 38), merely waiting to unfold into the beautiful women we see on the left.

In contrast to the Ralph Lauren images, the child model in the Rocawear Kids ad has managed to wipe away even the slightest hint of a smile (Figure 30). As mentioned earlier, two of the three boys in this ad are actually looking down at the viewer. The boy pictured in the head shot is even cocking his head to one side in a “tough guy” pose that rhymes with the posture of his adult equivalent: Damon Dash, co-founder of the Rocawear brand. And, in a visual display of mutual age-compression reminiscent of Diesel, the boy is wearing a very grown-up pinstriped wool blazer while the adult sports a boy-ish baseball cap and varsity jacket. But the primary thrust of the prolepsis is
upwardly mobile: the boy’s smoldering eyes connote the fire of manhood already burning in his belly.

Finally, the Baby Phat adult and child head shots (Figure 31) echo the eye-contact, head-tilt, and facial expressions of the two previous brands. In addition, both Kimora Lee and her daughters are lit from below and crowned with a purple hair flower in the midst of a quasi-Asian setting. Of course, the relationship between Baby Phat’s adult and children’s lines is further cemented by the family ties of the models. Indeed, Ming and Aoki not only share their mother’s DNA, but could also stand to inherit the family business. Thus, Baby Phat Girlz embodies the visual foretaste of the future: when distinguished social status is assumed to be the inevitable destiny of the children. In other words, the knowledge of what they are going to be co-exists with what are right now. Ming is not just a girl, she is also the next Kimora Lee. Better yet, photographing Ming with such a knowing and self-aware expression suggests that, in many ways, Ming already is Kimora Lee (Figure 32):
The circulation of these images in popular outlets like *Cookie* magazine represents, perhaps unwittingly, a prolepsis of the adult-within-the-child through facial expressions connoting the power and sexuality of adulthood. Just as the child models regard us with utter indifference, they objectify themselves for our mediated (paraproxemic) gaze. Thus, we are free to admire their visages like valuable works of art, which, if acquired, would reflect well on us while inviting the envy of others. These ads, then, are not intimate family photos perched on the mantel over the hearth of the home; they are new “hyperritualizations” of *trophy children* displayed behind glass for all to see. Such images sell an impossible, yet compelling, impression of “cute sophistication” and “knowing innocence.” But what happens when playing dress-up is for keeps? If these ads are correct, sexy kids have the edge—with the game of life barely begun, their victory is all but assured.
The Model Child Returns

In August of 2006, John Mark Karr was taken into custody for the murder of six-year-old JonBenet Ramsey. His arrest sparked a media firestorm and, once again, images of the young beauty queen were plastered over newsstands and television screens all across the country (Figure 33). The charges against Karr have since been dropped, but the reaction to his bogus confession bespeaks the public’s fervent and unflagging interest in the case. Surely much has changed in the ten years since the crime first occurred. For instance, one might have expected that, after the outcry against JonBenet’s mother in particular and backlash against child beauty pageants in general, society would no longer suffer children being dressed up like dolls and paraded around in public. But that is precisely what has happened for two years running at the Child
magazine Fashion Show during Olympus Fashion Week in New York City (Figure 34). During modeling auditions, organizers seemed to be all too aware of the irony. Gay Morris Empson, a Child magazine editor, was careful to avoid candidates whose swinging hips or jutting pelvises conjured up ghosts of the past: “It's basically about personality, being comfortable in clothes and not being forced to be here….above all, it's kids not looking sexy. No JonBenets.” (“Tots Hit Fashion Runway,” 2006. p. 1)

![Figure 34: Child Fashion Show (“Tots Hit Fashion Runway,” 2006) From left to right: Ming and her parents Kimora Lee and Russell Simmons](image)

It should be clear by now that few people in the children’s fashion industry actually intend to exploit children. And yet, the explosion of designer brands for kids all but requires the massive employment of a whole new generation of JonBenets. New faces must be harvested, groomed, and put under contract. Parents must be wrangled, dressing rooms stocked with toys, and make-up—but not too much make-up—applied
with care. Child beauty pageants, once marginal, have now gone mainstream—cloaked under the more respectable guise of “fashion.” The boom creates a powerful suction, pulling industry creatives into an emerging infrastructure of financial incentives.

Writing in the professional trade journal *Photo District News*, Kristina Feliciano (2005) puts it plainly: “right now children's fashion photography is exploding in editorial and advertising….there's more demand than ever for photographers who shoot little people” (p. 1). As a result, talent agencies like Jet Set Models are busy compiling stockpiles of fresh faces for hire. It’s no wonder that Lindsay Stewart, director of the children's division at Jet Set (Figure 35), is so bullish about the future:

There is a huge influx of kids' photography. Every week there seems to be a new, cool, hip kids' company springing up. And with that comes advertising… Many of my child models have been featured in adult campaigns for David Yurman, Ralph Lauren, Clinique and Versace...It's a huge business! (Feliciano, 2005, p. 1)

![Figure 35: Child Models ("Jet Set Boys," December 4, 2006)](image-url)
**Argument Summary**

When it comes to the exploitation of children, concerned citizens are quick to look for scapegoats, whether it be a high-profile provocateur like Calvin Klein, or the lonely, perverted pedophile that lurks among us. But in a media culture where images of beautiful children circulate widely, such witch hunts surely miss the orchard for the trees. Worse yet, undue focus on only the most sensational violations of taboo further obscures the army of JonBenets on the march in broad daylight. These images, rendered “normal” when compared to so-called “bad apples,” fade into the background of the culture like ideological wallpaper—they set the mood without drawing attention.

Following Goffman’s (1979) lead, I have sought out such “uncontroversial” ads in order to consider how they might present a “hyperritualization” of childhood. Of particular interest were ads for designer clothing that posed the child models in very adult ways. Aware that advertising’s impact on society is not limited to the products that it ostensibly sells (Jhally, 1987), I wondered about the unintended and cumulative effect of such images. To even begin to approach such questions, I could ill-afford to be short-sighted. And yet, as most social scientists are all too painfully aware, I am necessarily blinded by the limits of my own peripheral vision. I pray that my omissions, though inevitable, have left the big picture intact. I will now summarize the argument as it stands.

In “Theories of Consumption,” I pondered what might drive a consumer to invest in such an expensive and ephemeral commodity like designer children’s clothing. Drawing heavily on the work of Veblen (1899), I describe how mothers could gain social prestige by consuming vicariously through their own children. I also noted how
we all use fashion to help define what we are and are not, but these decisions can tend toward the quotidian and unconscious. In this way, lavish expressions of personal taste may reinforce class structures, but are rarely experienced as such (Bourdieu, 1984). And Chin (2001) reminded us that consumption remains steeped in historical context and therefore fraught with inequality. More specifically, black Americans’ access to the market was severely restricted during slavery—a time when they themselves were traded as commodities. Moreover, the continued humiliation of segregation and institutional racism have raised the stakes for consumption practices among black Americans and might help explain the meteoric rise of hip-hop moguls turned fashion designers.

In “Methods, Texts, and Contexts,” I explained how semiotics can provide the analytical leverage to pry apart the ideas and products that advertisements seek to bind together. For example, most ads are designed to access viewer’s existing “store of experience,” a catalogue of images that provides the referent system for everyday meaning-making. Similarly, Cookie achieves intelligibility by referring its structure and lay-out to the already established genre of women’s fashion magazines. Since all images are understood in relationship to others, semiotics offers a way for us to reinstate the missing quotation marks and cite sources.

The next chapter, “Prolepsis,” compared children and adult ad campaigns within the same designer brand and found that many of the children’s ads encoded the adult as already present within the child. For example, since many Rocawear ads feature Jay-Z, then ads for Rocawear Kids will seek to preserve the bloodline of the brand by rhyming the child models with the original referent. In other words, through a combination of
formal aesthetic conventions and facial expressions, the fashion-forward child is depicted as a little Jay-Z just waiting to happen. This is the essence of prolepsis: the child model who promises to grow up to be handsome is, at once, *already* handsome. Diesel takes symbolic age compression one step further, juxtaposing silly adults with glum children so that the manner of the models compensates for the limitations of their bodies: the children complement their “pure” physical state with the sophistication of age as expressed through jaded expressions and the adults recover the playfulness of their youth through ecstatic gesticulations. Thus, like the virgin/whore dichotomy, Diesel offers reconciliation of opposing ideas: innocence and experience.

In the culmination of my analysis, “Facial Expression,” I described how ads for designer children’s clothing are best understood as mediated forms of social interaction operating within the visual referent systems of everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Drawing on Meyrowitz’s (1986) theory of para-proxemics, I suggested that ads depicting children looking straight out at the viewer suggest a relationship of parity—symbolically promoting the children to the level of adults. As many of the children in these ads were not smiling, I recounted the cultural history of the smile—arguing that it had not always been the default response to a photograph. On the contrary, smiles were traditionally associated with weakness and the withholding of a smile during social interaction has endured to this day as a sign of dominance typically reserved for men. A notable exception occurs in haute couture fashion where female models walk the catwalk wearing, not a deferent smile, but a proud, steely gaze. This is the “look” I found in many of the ads. And just as a smile signals polite submission in most social interactions, a supposedly neutral expression with direct eye contact is, in fact, a rude
power play designed to provoke envy (Berger, 1977). My argument, then, is simple: designer clothing advertisements depicting non-smiling children in eye-level direct address encode the images with a confrontational form of sexual maturity and self-awareness. When facing the camera, these models are neither bashful nor goofy—they are cool. With their emotions firmly under control, they display a self-assured, haute couture-style expression that says: “Yes, I know I’m beautiful, but don’t expect me to smile because you are below me.”

As we saw in the introduction, several theorists (Blaine, 1999; Higonnet, 1998; Hymowitz, 2001; Kincaid, 1998) agree with Holland’s (2004) assertion that Western culture defines adulthood largely through sex: adults have it, kids don’t. At first glance, this boundary seems quite easy to maintain: stop children from having sex and you’ll stop them from becoming adults. But while the self-proclaimed protectors of childhood innocence busy themselves scrutinizing images of half-naked children, the largely uncontroversial ads in this study do an end-run around such well-meaning prohibitions. By posing the young—and fully clothed—models as knowing adults, they smuggle sexualized children into the culture through the back door. Put another way, if the concept of adulthood is cordoned off as an exclusive club whose principal membership privilege is sexual availability, then what we have seen in these ads is the visual construction of a fake I.D.—a “personal front” able to gain symbolic entrance into a restricted world. Moreover, I suspect that, in visual advertisements, adult poses do not so much require the baring of skin as the display of a particular attitude. Sexuality, then, is not so much exposed as it is expressed.
Limitations and Future Research

This report is largely exploratory in nature. Though I did count some ads, it is by no means a content analysis. My sample was not random, nor large enough to generalize to a larger population. In addition, by limiting the “universe” of my ads to Cookie magazine, I may have skewed the sample towards “edgier” designer brands, entirely avoiding cheaper, more mainstream (and perhaps more conservative) clothing brands advertised in newspaper inserts from retailers like Target, K-Mart. One rationale for this choice would be that the styles and imagery of the high-end brands will eventually “trickle-down” into the mainstream, but this is anyone’s guess. I also regret that I was forced to pull so many adult ads from the web; I would have preferred to glean all of my print ads from magazines. But even so, it would be difficult for me to prove that Cookie readers had seen the corresponding adult clothing ads in Vogue. This is an inherent difficulty in tracing visual referent systems: who knows who has seen what? Which brings me to another limitation: the audience. Any ideas about actual interpretation of these ads and the resulting media effects are purely speculative.

The flaws and limitations of my design do, however, suggest avenues for future research. For instance, are more middle-brow clothing outlets (Target/Kmart) more conservative in their depiction of childhood? In other words, are their models happier? And if so, why? Is that because their clientele is more religious/prudish? Conversely, is high-end fashion synonymous with permissiveness/promiscuity? Moreover, are politics and taste linked? I would also like to eventually conduct an audience study of the “mother’s gaze.” If women survey themselves through the eye’s of men, how do they then regard images of children? And how is this mitigated by gender and heterosexual...
persuasion? Do they see through their fear of the pedophile? Or their own hopes for their children to be desired by others and thus climb up the social ladder? My analysis would also benefit from ethnographic studies of various encoding and decoding sites, namely the agencies who create the ads and the places where audiences consume them.
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