



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 11-12  
**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# The Pornography Debate: Controversy in Advertising



This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*:  
<http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

## Overview

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In this lesson, through classroom discussion, students are introduced to the issue of pornography. Students will understand the difficulty in determining the sometimes very fine lines between erotica, freedom of expression, and sexual exploitation and to familiarize them with guidelines for making these distinctions.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students will demonstrate:

- an understanding of what constitutes pornography
- knowledge of the guidelines that have been established to regulate pornography in the advertising industry
- an appreciation of the difficulties in enforcing these guidelines

## Preparation and Materials

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- Review the backgrounder *Canadian Advertising Foundation Gender Portrayal Guidelines*
- Prepare the *Definition of Pornography* graphic
- Make copies of the handouts:
  - *American Apparel: A Case Study*
  - *Canadian Advertising Foundation's Guidelines Relating to Pornography*
  - *Criminal Code of Canada Definition of "Child Pornography"*
  - *American Apparel: Case Study Assignment*



## The Lesson

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Ask your students

- What is pornography? (After they have brainstormed definitions, place the *Definition of Pornography* transparency onto the projector.)
- What is the difference between an erotic response and an aesthetic or emotional response?
- How do you decide whether or not an image is pornographic?

*This last question is not a simple one to answer. Each society has different standards in determining what is, or isn't pornographic. For example, European countries tend to be more permissive regarding explicit material than are Canada and the United States. In Canada and the U.S., definitions of what is and isn't pornographic are included in our criminal codes, as well as in film and advertising industry guidelines and regulations. Yet despite these parameters, courts are still challenged in determining the fine line between erotica and sexual exploitation. In Canada, the Canadian Advertising Foundation has established **Gender Portrayal Guidelines**, which include guidelines that relate to sexual exploitation of men and women.*

- Why are people particularly concerned with young people's exposure to pornography?

*Experts are concerned about young people being exposed to sexualized media, including porn, for a number of reasons:*

- *They may not recognize that it's a media construction and not a reflection of healthy sexuality (one expert compares porn to pro wrestling in terms of how realistic it is)*
- *It gives young people, especially boys, a "script" for how sex and relationships work that is unrealistic and unhealthy*
- *It provides misconceptions and mistaken information about relationships, sexual health and consent*
- *It promotes negative ideas about body image in both boys and girls, and actually portrays a very narrow image of sexuality*
- *Because of the networked nature of the Internet, it's very easy to go from "mild" sexualized content to much more extreme and specialized material*
- *It puts pressure on both boys and girls to behave sexually in ways they may not be comfortable with*
- *It promotes stereotypes about the roles men and women should play in relationships*

Distribute the handout *Canadian Advertising Foundation's Guidelines Relating to Pornography* and carefully review it with your students.

### Activity One Group Assignment

- Divide the class into small groups
- Using the *Guidelines* clauses, have students find examples for each point from magazines in the school library, or from fashion, sports, video game or teen magazines they have brought to class.



- In presenting their images to class, students should identify
  - the title and type of magazine that the ad came from
  - it's target audience
  - how their images relate to each guideline
  - the underlying message of each ad

After each presentation, ask the rest of the class whether or not they agree with the images selected by the group.

### Activity Two Case Study Assignment

A particular concern in recent years has been the mainstreaming of pornography and images drawn from it. **The Criminal Code of Canada** defines "Pornography" in terms of sexualization of images of children, (distribute *Canadian Advertising Foundation's Guidelines Relating to Pornography*) but there is still debate among the courts, publishers and special interest groups as to what constitutes pornography.

Distribute the handouts *American Apparel: A Case Study* and *Case Study Assignment* to students.

### Evaluation

- Group presentation
- Expository essay

### Extension Activity

An additional activity that is relevant to this topic is the **CITY-TV re Fashion Television Case Study** from the unit *Broadcast Codes*. In this assignment, students assume the role of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, (CBSC) in responding to a complaint received by a broadcaster (in this case, CITY-TV) regarding its programming. Using a copy of the Canadian Association of Broadcaster's *Sex Role Portrayal Code for Television and Radio Programming* as a reference, students are to determine what decision the CBSC will reach regarding a viewer's complaint about a segment from *Fashion Television*. In order to complete this assignment, students will need copies of the following handouts from the *Broadcasting Codes* lesson (<http://mediasmarts.ca/lessonplan/broadcasting-codes-lesson>).

- *The Player's in Canada's Broadcasting Industry*
- *The Canadian Standards Broadcast Council (CBSC) Complaints Process*
- *Canadian Association of Broadcaster's (CAB) Sex Role Portrayal Code for Television and Radio Programming*
- *You Be the Judge: Group Assignment*
- *You Be the Judge: CITY-TV re Fashion Television (Case Study)*
- *You Be the Judge: Verdict - CITY-TV re Fashion Television*



## Canadian Advertising Foundation Gender Portrayal Guidelines

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### GUIDELINE CLAUSES

#### 1. Authority

Advertising should strive to provide an equal representation of women and men in roles of authority both for the characters within the actual advertising scenario and when representing the advertiser through announcers, voice-overs, experts and on-camera authorities.

#### Comment

*While advertisers have made noticeable progress in providing equal representation of men and women in roles of authority, some disparity still exists. In particular, individual advertisers should give equal consideration to women in the area of voice-overs.*

#### 2. Decision-Making

Women and men should be portrayed equally as single decision-makers for all purchases including big-ticket items. Where joint decision-making is reflected, men and women should be portrayed as equal participants in the decision-making process, whether in the workplace or at home.

#### Comment

*Both women and men are active decision-makers for all categories of personal and household purchases as well as in the workforce. Advertising should reflect this reality.*

#### 3. Sexuality

Advertising should avoid the inappropriate use or exploitation of sexuality of both women and men.

#### Comment

*Exploiting is interpreted as a presentation in which sexuality is on display merely for the gratification of others. When sexuality is relevant to the product being advertised or is part of the creative scenario, it should be treated with sensitivity and respect for the individual(s).*

**Advertising should specifically avoid the following:**

#### Sexualization

There is nothing wrong with positive, relevant sexuality in advertising which portrays a person in control of and celebrating, her/his own sexuality. However, people must not be portrayed as primarily sexual or defined by their sexuality. Clothes, behaviours, positions and poses, camera angles, camera as voyeur, language, audio track, and/or product placement can all contribute, implicitly or explicitly, to sexualization.

#### Sexualization of Children

Boys and girls under the age of 16 must not be portrayed as displaying adult sexual characteristics. Similarly, adult women must not be portrayed as girls or with child-like characteristics while maintaining adult sexual characteristics.

## Gender Role Stereotyping

Social and sexual interactions must portray women and men as equals and must not reinforce stereotypes, such as male dominant/female submissive.

## Irrelevant Associations

- a) Using or displaying a woman's sexuality in order to sell a product that has no relation to sexuality is by definition sexually exploitative.
- b) Advertising must avoid the exploitation of nudity and the irrelevant segmentation of body parts.

## Sexual Harassment

Advertising must not portray sexual harassment as acceptable or normal behaviour in either covert or overt ways, and should avoid representing women as prey or objects of uncontrolled desire.

## Objectification and Commodization

People must not be sexually portrayed as objects, toys, animals or with animal-like characteristics. Nor should products be attributed with negative gender stereotypical characteristics.

## 4. Violence

Neither sex should be portrayed as exerting domination over the other by means of overt or implied threats, or actual force.

### Comment

*Men and women should be portrayed equally as in control of their person and their surroundings. Images and texts which imply domination, aggression, or violence, or enjoyment of the same, should not be used.*

## 5. Diversity

Advertising should portray both men and women in the full spectrum of diversity and as equally competent in a wide range of activities both inside and outside the home.

### Comment

*Today in Canadian society there is no single contemporary family structure. Men and women take part in a broad variety of responsibilities, occupations, lifestyles and activities. This diversity should be portrayed in advertising. Further, women and men of various ages, appearances and backgrounds should be considered when creating advertising.*

## 6. Language

Advertising should avoid language that misrepresents, offends or excludes women or men.

### Comment

*The equality of the sexes should be reflected through the use of gender neutral language, e.g. fire fighter instead of fireman and synthetic instead of man-made. Language should also reflect the equal dignity of both genders e.g. men and women instead of men and girls, and must not include pejorative or inappropriate terms.*



## Definition of Pornography

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# Pornography

**The explicit depiction or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, films or photography that is intended to stimulate erotic, rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings.**



## American Apparel: A Case Study

No advertiser better illustrates the mainstreaming of pornography than American Apparel. When the company entered the retail market in the early 2000s its ads stressed the fact that the clothes were made by non-sweatshop labour in the United States, but before long they began to flirt with the porn aesthetic in the tradition of Calvin Klein and Abercrombie & Fitch. According to founder Dov Charney, the change was not that radical, saying “I think sexual freedom and economic freedom go hand in hand... Life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness.”



As American Apparel began to become known for its racy ads it took this a step further, with ads that were drawn directly from porn imagery. The company represented the ads as a more “honest” representation of sexuality than other advertising, claiming that they “feature real people instead of professional models.” (In fact, though, most of the ads used models, and some actually featured porn actors.) The rise of American Apparel coincided with the growth of Internet pornography, and unlike earlier ad campaigns that had drawn on a “vintage” porn aesthetic, American Apparel’s ads reflected the availability and diversity of online pornography by copying particular types of porn such as bondage and “upskirt” photos. The Internet also made it possible for American Apparel to run ads online that were too racy for print, including some that included nudity, and allowed the customers to find ads that had been banned from appearing in print.

Critics argue that American Apparel’s ads were a major factor in the “pornification” of modern culture, and while only a few brands such as Axe and Diesel have fully followed American Apparel’s lead, some say that young women are following suit in how they present themselves in social media: as one girl told *New York Times* writer Randye Holder, “If you want a boy to look at you, you do a bikini shot or push your boobs out.” This, in turn, led to American Apparel copying the latest trend in porn by creating ads that looked like young women’s “sexts”.

The girls Holder spoke to warned that while it was good to make yourself look “sexy,” girls who went too far would be seen as “slutty” or as having a “bad reputation” — which may be what happened to American Apparel: the business filed for bankruptcy in October of 2015. While years of mismanagement are probably more responsible for that than a backlash against their ads, it’s also true that by pushing porn imagery into the mainstream, American Apparel lost what made it cool and distinctive. (In fact, though, porn — both professional and home-made — are much less mainstream than media coverage might suggest: only 1 in 3 Canadian teens has looked for porn online, and fewer than one in 10 Grade 9 students in Canada has sent a sext.) In an age where real porn can be accessed with the click of a button, putting watered-down porn imagery in your ads is no longer enough to shock — or to sell.



## Canadian Advertising Foundation's Guidelines Relating to Pornography

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The following are excerpts from the voluntary Canadian Advertising Foundation Gender Portrayal Guidelines relating to pornography.

### **Sexuality**

- Advertising should avoid the inappropriate use or exploitation of sexuality of both women and men.

#### Comment

*Exploitation is interpreted as a presentation in which sexuality is on display merely for the gratification of others. When sexuality is relevant to the product being advertised or is part of the creative scenario, it should be treated with sensitivity and respect for the individual(s).*

- Advertising must avoid the exploitation of nudity and the irrelevant segmentation of body parts.
- Boys and girls under 16 must not be portrayed as displaying adult sexual characteristics. Adult women must not be portrayed as girls or with childlike characteristics while maintaining adult sexual characteristics.
- Social and sexual interactions must portray women and men as equals and must not reinforce stereotypes, such as male dominant/female submissive.
- Using or displaying a woman's sexuality in order to sell a product that has no relation to sexuality is, by definition, sexually exploitative.
- Advertising must not portray sexual harassment as acceptable or normal, and should avoid representing women as prey or objects of uncontrolled desire.

### **Violence**

- Neither sex should be portrayed as exerting domination over the other by means of overt or implied threats, or actual force.

#### Comment

*Men and women should be portrayed equally as in control of their person and their surroundings. Images and texts which imply domination, aggression, or violence, or enjoyment of the same, should not be used.*





## Criminal Code of Canada Definition of "Child Pornography"

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According to Section 163.1 of the Criminal Code, "Child Pornography" means:

- **a photographic, film, video or other visual representation, whether or not it was made by electronic or mechanical means**
  - that shows a person who is, or is depicted, as being under the age of eighteen years and is engaged in, or is depicted as engaged in, explicit sexual activity, or
  - the sexual depiction of the sexual organs of a person under the age of eighteen years; or
- **any written material or visual representation that advocates or counsels sexual activity with a person under the age of eighteen years.**



## American Apparel: Case Study Assignment

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American Apparel and other brands have received criticism for “mainstreaming” pornography by using images drawn from porn in their ads. Experts are concerned about young people being exposed to sexualized media, including porn, for a number of reasons:

- They may not recognize that it’s a media construction and not a reflection of healthy sexuality (one expert compares porn to pro wrestling in terms of how realistic it is)
- It gives young people, especially boys, a “script” for how sex and relationships work that is unrealistic and unhealthy
- It provides misconceptions and mistaken information about relationships, sexual health and consent
- It promotes negative ideas about body image in both boys and girls, and actually portrays a very narrow image of sexuality
- Because of the networked nature of the Internet, it’s very easy to go from “mild” sexualized content to much more extreme and specialized material
- It puts pressure on both boys and girls to behave sexually in ways they may not be comfortable with
- It promotes stereotypes about the roles men and women should play in relationships

For this assignment, you will be writing a 500-word essay on the following question: “What, if anything, should be done (by governments, broadcasters, schools, industry, etc.) about young people’s exposure to sexualized content?” (Make sure to include at least three specific reasons that support your overall argument.)



## Task Assessment Rubric: Presentation/Essay

	<b>Learning Expectations</b>	<b>Achievement</b>
<p><b>Use</b></p> <p>Skills and competencies that fall under “use” range from basic technical know-how – using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email, and other communication tools – to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.</p>	<p><i>Digital Health:</i></p> <p>identify habits and behaviours (eg, excessive screen time or video game usage, smoking) that can be detrimental to sexual health and healthy relationships</p> <p>assess and reduce/avoid technology related threats to his/her sexual health and healthy relationships</p> <p><i>Consumer Awareness:</i></p> <p>understand the technologies he/she is using at a level that is sufficient to underpin consumer activism</p>	<p>Insufficient (R);</p> <p>Beginning (1);</p> <p>Developing (2);</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>
<p><b>Understand</b></p> <p>Understand includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us.</p> <p>Understand also prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.</p>	<p><i>Digital Health:</i></p> <p>demonstrate awareness of his/her media habits and the array of media he/she uses on a weekly basis, and the role of digital media in his/her life</p> <p>demonstrate an understanding of the ways that media influence attitudes and opinions</p> <p><i>Consumer Awareness:</i></p> <p>understand the ways websites and companies use sexuality to influence consumers' spending habits, as well as consider companies' motives in doing so</p> <p>show an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in relation to sexualisation and pornography</p>	<p>Insufficient (R);</p> <p>Beginning (1);</p> <p>Developing (2);</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>



	<b>Learning Expectations</b>	<b>Achievement</b>
<p><b>Create</b></p> <p>Create is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools. It includes being able to adapt what we produce for various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video and sound; and to effectively and responsibly engage with user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social gaming and other forms of social media.</p> <p>The ability to create using digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to digital society.</p>	<p><i>Consumer Awareness:</i></p> <p>develop personal rules of conduct that ensure healthy and safe practices</p> <p><i>Community Engagement:</i></p> <p>create a work (debate or essay) that clearly communicates their understanding and expresses their opinion on the issues relating to sexualisation and pornography</p> <p>identify and participate responsibly in discussions that foster positive community</p> <p>show an understanding of the interrelationship between rights and responsibilities online</p>	<p>Insufficient (R);</p> <p>Beginning (1);</p> <p>Developing (2);</p> <p>Competent (3)</p> <p>Confident (4)</p>

