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Girls and Harmful Advertising

Dr Emma Rush published “Adult World Must Let Girls Be Girls” in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the 10th of October 2006 in response to the growing issue of advertising “sexy” to young children, especially girls. She begins with all the products that are advertised to these young impressionable children and proceeds to the mental harm that can come from these tactics. As a researcher of ethics who is known for her work on the topic of the sexualization of children, she brings up how magazines marketed at young girls are often about female celebrities and their boyfriends, and how these magazines seem to encourage them to want a relationship with men older than themselves which only adds weight to her warnings (Rush 1). She talks about how all this is harmful to a young girl’s mental and physical development. She even considers the opposing point that claims that this empowers these young girls only to show that rather than empower, this places the children at risk and gives us some better avenues to empower the children. She gets at parents by attacking advertisers through arguing that the advertising is harmful. Showing the various products peddled to children to make them “sexy,” using an urgent tone to cause parents to worry about the culture this advertising perpetuates in children, and discussing what is lost because of the new focal point of the children’s time because of the culture they grow up in.

She begins the article trying to appeal to parents by telling them about the various products that are being peddled to their children (especially girls). She introduces her article with, “BRAS for eight-year-olds. Lip gloss for six-year-olds. Fashion and gossip magazines from age five.” (Rush 1). She begins by listing out various products that one would usually associate with a grown adult, but then juxtapose them to the age of the children that advertisers are targeting. With this she effectively forces the kinds of products that are marketed to young children into the minds of everyone reading. She proceeds to inform her readers of, “Children, particularly girls, are under increasing pressure from advertisers and marketers to adopt a ‘sexy’ persona from very young ages” (1). With this she succinctly tells her readers the impact that this is having on the children. She gets parents to start thinking of the ramifications of this advertising before discussing it in greater depth later on. She then returns focus to the products that the advertisers are selling with, “However, the forms ‘prettiness’ now takes, which include ‘bralettes’ for girls as young as three, as well as the language used to describe appearances in girls’ magazines directed at readers from five up (‘hot, hot, hot’), give the game away” (1). This brings the attention of parents back to all the products that are marketed to children that seem oddly adult in nature, from what they are to the descriptions they use. Dr Emma Rush effectively appeals to parents by showing them all the products and marketing that is done to target young girls, which causes parents to start to question all these practices that they likely simply glossed over before.

After Dr Rush brings up all the questionable practices, she knows that the parents are likely wondering how this is impacting their children, so she uses an urgent tone to show how harmful these practices are and how the parents should be worried too. Her discussion of the issues that are caused by the advertising begins when she says, “The emphasis on ‘ideal’ appearances brings some of the agonies of adolescence forward many years. In one recent study, about one-third of seven-year-old Australian girls wanted to be thinner, despite the fact that they were all within a normal healthy weight range” (1). This shows some actual problems that are brought about by the advertising while also showing that the problem isn’t just someone’s opinion, but rather something that is researched and is an issue. She then emphasizes this point by saying, “The pressure to have a ‘perfect’ appearance places children at greater risk of developing eating disorders at an age when nutrition is crucial – when they are still growing.” (1). She expands on why this is an issue, while using the fact that even though eating disorders are an issue at any point of life, it is much more harmful to a child that needs nutrition to develop. With her emphasis on how this impacts the health of children and her target audience being parents of young children, she effectively uses this urgent matter to show how the advertising is harmful to young children.

She brings attention to another important issue that the advertising causes by using a worried tone when she says, “The focus on sexual couplings found in girls' magazines, pitched at readers aged five to 13, may have dangerous implications for children who are approached by predatory adults. These magazines encourage girls to have ‘crushes’ on men older than themselves,” (1). With that, she leads the readers into the idea of a relationship between their child and a predatory adult before she directly asks, “How do we then expect them to behave if an older man approaches apparently offering romance?” (1). She implies how quickly down this scary path with a predatory adult which might scare a parent into action before it is too late. She further continues this train of thought when she says, “[this] implicitly suggests to adults that children are interested in and ready for sex. This is profoundly irresponsible, particularly given that it is known that pedophiles use not only child pornography but also more innocent photos of children.” (1). Her worried tone and knowledge tells parents that even if their child is not in a relationship with a predatory adult, their child may still be in danger of a predatory adult. With her use of logic and an urgent tone, she brings to mind all the immediate issues and risks that marketing to these young children carries.

She, however, does not only discuss the short-term issues that the marketing can cause, but she also brings in the longer-term issues that this can cause. She brings up the non-behavioral issues that this can cause when she says, “The developmental period known as ‘middle childhood’ (about six to 11 years old) is critical to children developing a sense of self and self-esteem.” (1). Through this, she initiates thoughts, in parents, about how else this might impact the children. She then promptly answers their question with an example, “If children perceive being ‘sexy’ as being important and their play time revolves around this theme – then they will miss out on other activities that better foster physical and cognitive development,” (2). She causes parents to evaluate what their own child is doing with their time and if it could be detrimental to their health. She then goes into the benefits of a child developing in other ways when she says, “For children seeking to become empowered in an adult world, a more promising route is to focus on developing cognitive and emotional capacities that enable them to negotiate power relations more maturely and with less risk to themselves.” (2). She explains that it is better for children to develop mentally as opposed to developing sexier as the advertisers suggest would lead to far more empowerment for the child.

Overall, Dr Emma Rush effectively brings the advertising to children into question through her attacks on the advertisers to tell parents about their practices, her use of a worried tone to indicate to parents that this is an urgent issue, and her use of logic to tell parents what their child is not developing and what they are losing the opportunity to do. Through all the techniques she uses in the article, she successfully causes parents to question the practices of advertising to companies and the harm it is causing.