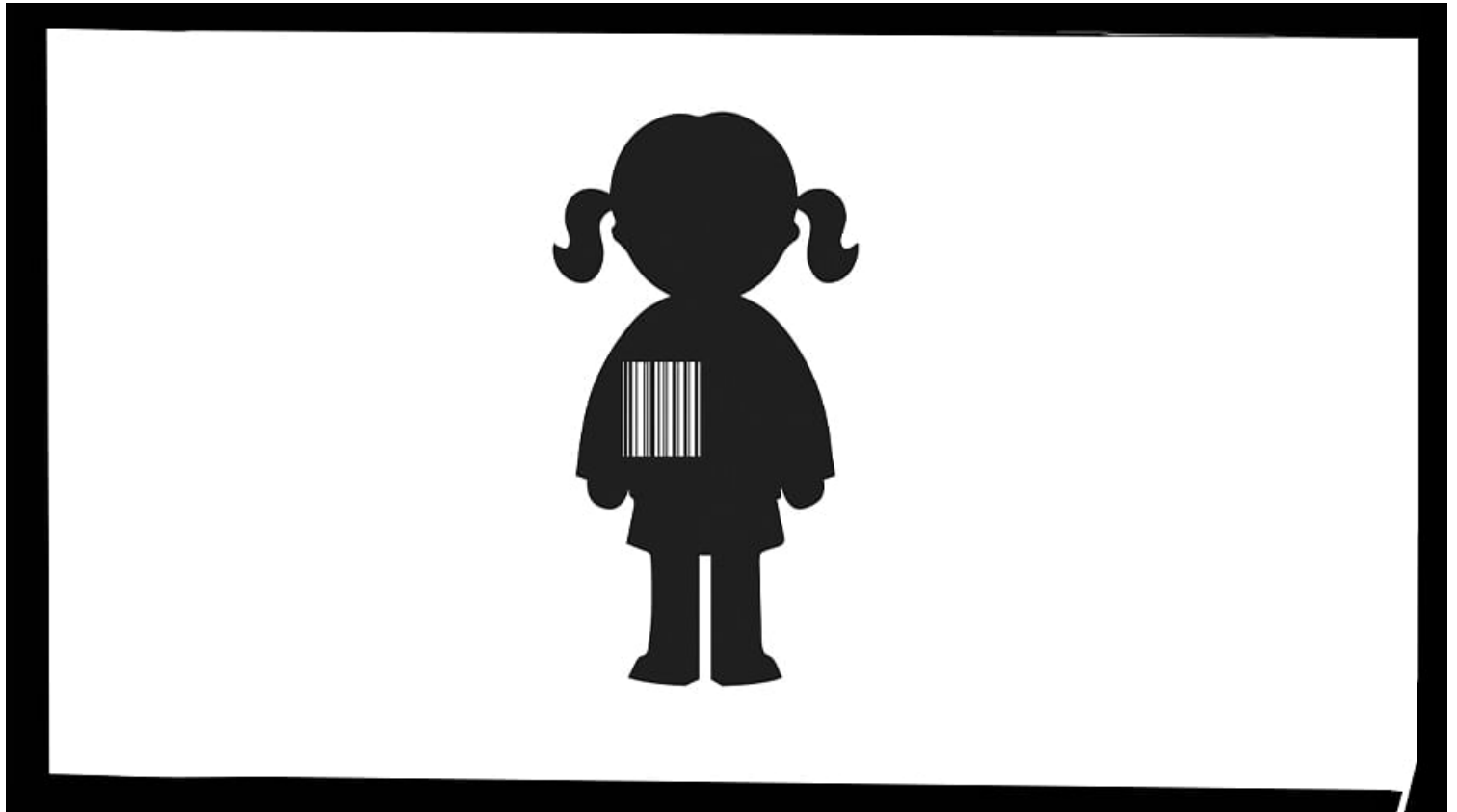


Let children be children

deccanherald.com/opinion/let-children-be-children-2866815

It is nothing but tragic to see that such deeply problematic and unaccepted practices are being encouraged in the domain of advertising, and the sexualization of women and, more significantly, premature girls is being treated so casually.



Credit: DH Illustration

Popular fashion brand H&M has recently faced considerable backlash and even been compelled to withdraw an advertisement campaign for school clothing. The brand was criticised for objectifying underaged girls and putting out an overtly problematic message. The advertisement campaign that was launched in Australia featured two very young girls dressed in school uniform with the caption, “Make those heads turn in H&M’s Back to School Fashion.”

The brand faced severe online criticism, centred around the perception by several users that the advertisement projected underage girls in a negative light and that it attempted to sexualize them. People commenting online argued that such advertisements perpetuate the notion that women are objects of desire, implying that drawing attention or “making heads turn” is their primary motive, whether they are going to school or to their workplaces. It is indeed ironic that a popular and multinational clothing brand such as H&M would produce and approve an advertisement campaign that not only objectifies young women but also deepens the already problematic patriarchal and misogynistic ideals ingrained in popular imagination.

In other words, it supports the culture of regressive and anti-women popular cultures where 'lookism' is naturalised and even projected as an aspirational goal. This phenomenon cannot, however, be seen in isolation. It must be seen as part of the larger cultural context in which we find ourselves. The commodification of the body and the objectified gaze are seen as all pervading realities in a market-driven world. It was only recently that another popular fashion brand, Balenciaga, had to issue a public apology for showcasing young children holding teddy bears wearing bondage-style attire and a printout of a Supreme Court decision that upheld laws that were against child pornography.

It is nothing but tragic to see that such deeply problematic and unaccepted practices are being encouraged in the domain of advertising, and the sexualization of women and, more significantly, premature girls is being treated so casually. While the advertisement and many such advertisements have been removed from popular media platforms after facing backlash, the root cause of the matter runs much deeper and demands careful reading of the misogynistic and hierarchical mindset that conceives and manufactures such ideas in the first place.

A careful look at television programmes in our own country, especially in the aftermath of the mushrooming growth of reality shows, shows a clear bent of intent towards the endorsement of a culture where minors are not just objectified but comfortably complimented for being sexually attractive or adult-like. The packaging of 'childhood' and children as sex objects for mass consumption is a rampant trend in popular media today, and this is being further celebrated on social media platforms such as Instagram, where children under the age of 18 are allowed access to the world of popular celebrity cultures and made vulnerable to influences that their juvenile minds are unable to deal with. It is unfortunate that we are exposing our children to a world that does not celebrate childhood in its true spirit but uses it to push forward its own agenda, which is often problematic not just in its intentions but also in its methods. The culture of passive consumption of popular media, including videos, photos, reels, and information, normalises uncritical thinking and the acceptance of everything without nuanced judgement.

We often look at it as driven by the desire for publicity or as a tool used by media influencers and popular cinema or cricket celebrities to make their presence overtly felt in the media without realising that even our own children are becoming passive victims of an illusory reality that can land them in depression and deeply wounded notions of the self. Any sensitive citizen would not find it impossible to realise that we do find ourselves in a world where the sexualization of children is quite normalised and, at times, even celebrated.

Popular fashion brands often sell clothes for young girls that blatantly promote objectification, and what makes matters even worse is that parents often do not see a problem in this and become parties to the crime when they dress their children up in these faux-adult attires. Provocative slogans and sexualized cuts often make these clothes look 'hep' or 'in-trend' but this leads to passive compliance with a culture that is problematic and unhealthy.

Tuning into a popular dance reality show targeted at children would be enough to tell us how we like to project children as faux adults wearing heavy makeup, provocative clothes, and imbibing adult-like gestures and moves. With dance moves that try to replicate popular film icons, such performances are lauded by celebrity judges for being 'sensual' and 'desirable.'

As parents, teachers, and well-wishers of our children, we need to fight against a popular culture that demeans and destroys childhood and poses a severely fractured notion of the 'body' as an object rather than a part of the body-mind whole. It is also the opportune time to rethink childhood and its representation in media so that we may pose a counter narrative to the popular projection of children as objects of desire.

(Vikash Sharma is Founding Editor, The New Leam and Ananya Pathak works at Azim Premji University, Bhopal)

(Published 27 January 2024, 02:56 IST)

childrenOpinionCommentH&M