



The Whole Package: Commodifying the Self

NAOMI JOHNSON

Key Terms

self-concept, consumption, marketing, mass media, celebrity culture

Ashley swept through her bedroom door, saucily placed her hand on her outthrust hip, and turned sideways for her best “red carpet” pose. She had learned the pose from her older sister Rachel’s group sorority pictures posted on Facebook. Rachel told Ashley the “tea cup” pose helped create a “skinny arm” and made you look thinner in pictures.

“What do you think, girls?”

Ashley’s best friends Suzie, Brittney, and Heather gazed at her and considered her question.

Brittney nodded in affirmation and sounded her approval. “Hot. Definitely a 10. That’ll get Jake’s attention!”

Suzie bit her lip. “I’m not so sure. Don’t you think the skirt is a little . . . short? And maybe the stockings are a bit . . . over the line.”

Ashley stomped her foot and sighed. “But, I’m not wearing them with heels, so it’s not skanky. Look, it’s Homecoming, so you’re allowed to be a bit ‘over the line,’ Suzie! How else will I get Jake’s attention?”

Ashley personally thought Suzie’s Japanese parents made her a bit too conservative when it came to dressing.

“Yeah, it’s just like in Cinderella—a little wave of the wand and *booyah*—a sparkly dress, new shoes, and, then *bam*—the love of a prince!” proclaimed Brittney.

Suzie rolled her eyes. “That’s a movie. This is real life in Columbus, Ohio. Not exactly Disney. Besides, don’t you remember that stupid Taylor Swift ‘You Belong to Me’ video that played over and over while we were in middle school? You get more attention for being an everyday girl in jeans than by trying to look like all sexy.”

Heather finally piped up. “Is that your new Abercrombie skirt? That is fetch.”

Ashley felt a small surge of pleasure from Heather's approval. She had just found the skirt with *the tags still on* at the Goodwill, but felt no need to let her friends know that it wasn't brand new from the store. Ashley didn't like for her friends to know that she couldn't keep up with their spending. Ever since her parents had gotten divorced, Ashley's mom had cut back on how much Ashley could spend on clothes. Her mom was always lecturing her about how it was all marketing anyhow, that Walmart's clothes were the same as anyone else's. Ashley didn't care how many lines of jeans Miley Cyrus sold at Walmart. It still didn't make it *cool* to shop there.

Ashley's family's newly reduced financial status was why she had suggested this sleepover with her friends to celebrate her 14th birthday. Before the divorce, one of their favorite activities had been shopping and a movie. But now it was watching DVDs and listening to the iPod at home. Ashley mentally shrugged. She didn't mind it much really. The girls had spent the evening watching MTV and chatting about high school life and the boys they liked, which had led to discussions about what to wear to Homecoming. This was the girls' first year of high school and they were looking forward to their first *real* dance with teenage boys instead of a bunch of middle-school nerds.

Heather, suddenly distracted from the discussion, turned up the volume on the first *Twilight* movie DVD that was playing on Ashley's bedroom television in the background. "Shhhh . . . this is my favorite part, where Edward carries her up the tree and they almost kiss!"

Ashley suffered a small pain of envy as Heather's attention moved away from her to the boy on the screen.

"See, Bella is a simple jeans kind of girl, and both Jacob *and* Edward want her." Suzie interjected, unwilling to relinquish the point.

Brittany jumped in, "Oh my God! Aren't you *sick* of the whole *Twilight* thing by now? I mean, Bella has no personality. She just walks around getting rescued by Edward all the time when he's not threatening to hurt her until she gives up her life to become a vampire. Doesn't sound like a good relationship to me."

Heather laughed and pointed to her Hot Topic hoodie emblazoned in glitter with the words "Stupid Lamb," referencing Bella's characterization of herself from the first novel.

"Put me firmly in the Team Edward camp," Heather said with a grin, alluding to the popular "Team Edward" or "Team Jacob" Burger King advertising campaign that had sparked hot debates at their school about whether Bella should date Edward or Jacob. "Give me a boy that sparkles. I'd wear jeans and become a vampire anytime to be with him."

Brittany snickered and threw a pillow at Heather. "You *would* say that!"

Ashley smiled and looked over her friends. They were all different, but she loved how their differences didn't pull them apart. They had been best friends since the sixth grade. They all teased each other over these differences at times, but they also shared their deepest secrets, laughed together, and supported each other when times were rough.

Suzie, whose real name was Setsuko, had been Columbus Middle School's top sprinter. She and her mother currently were training to run in a half-marathon later in the fall, and Suzie was hoping to make the high school track team. A sporty girl, Suzie favored Nike tennis shoes and Under Armor workout gear over the type of sparkly shirt that Heather preferred these days. However, underneath all that, Suzie liked to be a little bit girly, too. Ashley knew for a fact from their shopping expeditions that Suzie favored Victoria Secret's Pink line of bras and underwear. "After all," Suzie had once reasoned to the group during a shopping expedition, "even though nobody sees them, I still like to feel pretty." She merely ignored it when Heather had wisecracked back in a sing-songy voice, "Sure it's not so you can look sexy for Kelvin?"

Thinking back on it, Ashley realized that this was a perfect example of how much Heather had changed over the last year. Among themselves, she, Suzie, and Brittany had voiced some worries about this change in their friend. Heather didn't know this, but some of the other girls at school had started calling her "Heather the Hussy" behind her back.

Ashley had admired Heather's beautiful figure ever since they were 12 and Heather's curves started filling out. To the envy of her friends and the often not-so-subtle admiration of some of their male classmates, Heather had the largest breasts of the four girls—34C's, in fact. (Ashley knew this from that Victoria Secret shopping trip and late night girlfriend chats). Lately, Heather had taken to showing her breasts off in form fitting t-shirts as she had gone quite "boy crazy" (as she herself termed it). At the moment, Heather was especially fond of her latest t-shirt acquisition from Aeropostale that proclaimed, "Hello, My Name is Hottie." Actually, the Hot Topic hoodie Heather currently was wearing was somewhat of a departure for her. Heather typically preferred the "preppy," yet "sexy" looks of Aeropostale or Abercrombie. "If I mix a little naughty with nice, it shows that I'm unpredictable!" she had once confided to Ashley.

Heather's reputation at school was starting to precede her. Even the teachers were noticing. Just last week, Heather had been sent home to change because she was in violation of the school dress code with her lacy black shirt over a red cami. Ashley had been nervous because she just so happened to have worn a similar lace shirt that day, but hers was white over a more modest blue cami. No one had made a remark about Ashley's choice of an outfit, but maybe that was because she didn't have half the bod that Heather had to fill it out. Really, it didn't seem fair at all, Ashley thought. No one cared about how much flesh the boys could show, but the girls had to wear shorts or skirts that were longer than their fingertips, and couldn't wear "revealing" tops.

Brittany took a bite of the Atkins diet bar that appeared to be her dinner for the evening. "Hey, don't you have some *Seventeens* or *Cosmos* or something? They might have some ideas for how to do our hair," Brittany suggested, interrupting Ashley's reverie.

Brittany, the fashionista of the group, could always be counted on to be "on trend." Brittany was going places. She was writing for the school paper's Style section

regularly, even though she was only a first year student. An aspiring fashion designer, Brittany read fashion magazines and followed websites like gURL.com and cosmo-girl.com religiously for the latest celebrity looks (and gaffes!). Brittany's work had paid off in a big way. Recently, a local marketing company called Ally had started asking for *her* opinion on their latest teen tastes. Once a month, Brittany met with other "cool hunters" (as Ally termed them), talked about the latest teen trends, and gave opinions on new lines of clothing and electronics. Ally even let her keep some of the products as a thank-you for her expertise! Then she would post her inside knowledge on her blog, "All Girl." Brittany wasn't just about fashion, though. Ashley could always depend on her for good advice on everything from parents to school to relationships.

"Suzie, since Heather is *obviously* busy, why don't you see what you can pull up on the laptop? Try gURL.com—they've got some good quizzes that'll be just what we need."

While Suzie started searching on her laptop, Ashley pulled out her magazines. Kristen Stewart, Selena Gomez, Dakota Fanning, Taylor Swift, and other stars gazed back at her with perfect hair, make-up, and features. The covers promised some answers to match these looks: "Diet Makeover: 10 Ways to a Healthier *Hotter* Body!" "5 Secret Celebrity Beauty Tips!" "Kissing 101—Get smoochable lips!"

"Which boob is bigger?" Suzie seriously intoned, staring at the laptop screen.

"What!" shrieked Ashley.

"Oh, my God. What is up with you?" giggled Heather.

"Hey, Brittany said she wanted to take a quiz. That's what gURL.com wants to know. Is it right, left, or I don't know?"

Brittany grabbed the laptop. "Stay focused here, girls. We've got a mission to make Ashley Jake-presentable."

Brittany ignored the ads for Spanx body shapers, Playtex Sport tampons, and a *Seventeen* magazine contest entry for a shopping spree that appeared on the webpage. She paused to check out the newest Miley Cyrus video that began playing in the corner of the screen with information about the latest song downloads. Brittany liked the fringed Ugg boots that Miley was sporting. She made a mental note to look them up on celebritystyle.com and post the link to the store that sold them on her next blog.

"Oh, eeeew. I can't stand Miley!" protested Suzie when the laptop began playing the song.

"I like her!" countered Ashley. "You're just mad because that Facebook app I sent you last week said that the Disney star that you're most like is Hannah Montana, and now that she's Miley Cyrus, she's not the same. She can't be Disney forever you know."

"Yeah, well, she was only 16 when she was dancing on a pole at the Teen Choice Awards. That's nasty," Suzie retorted.

"You know, my Mom's gym gives pole-dancing classes. It's not like it's just for strippers or something. It can be for exercise too," Heather chimed in. Just for effect, she jumped up, straddled a nearby floor lamp, and thrust her hips a few times. "There, my workout is done!"

Suzie looked uncomfortable. Ashley's pulse jumped a beat, and she quickly looked away.

"Okay, this will work," Brittany declared with satisfaction and entered the "gURL games" section that asked "Which celebrity hairstyle best fits your personality?" She logged into her gURL account so that the site would automatically send her the results with links to e-coupons on the various companies' websites for the products necessary to create the ideal look.

Meanwhile, Suzie contemplated the latest *CosmoGirl!* As usual, most of the models were white and didn't look anything like her.

"Hey, Ashley, what do you think of this? It says here that they recommend L'Oreal Perfect Curves cream to make smooth waves. You can use it to do this 'party ponytail.' That would look cute, but not like you're trying too hard." Suzie pointed to the product reviews and styling tips in the "Celebrate your Inner Diva" article while Ashley glanced at the Pantene ad on the adjoining page.

Ashley frowned and contemplated the choices her friends were laying out.

Getting Ready for the Dance

Ashley stared into her closet, but nothing seemed quite right. Her mom always talked about how good girls didn't need to look trashy to get a date. But, on the other hand, her mom was kind of old-fashioned. Did she really want to get fashion advice from her *mom*, of all people? Ashley thought about the products that Brittney had recommended for a sleek, smooth ponytail and pulled out the Spanx slimmer that Brittney had lent so that she could avoid "unsightly bulges" or the dreaded VPI (visible panty line). Of course, Ashley hadn't told her friend that she couldn't afford to buy the more expensive Bumble and Bumble hair glaze that Brittney swore by and recommended.

As she stared into her closet, Ashley contemplated the outfits and hairstyles the girls had worked out during the slumber party. Now that she actually was getting ready, Ashley felt less confident that she would stand out from the other girls. Not that she wanted to stand out *too* much, she quickly thought. Ashley wondered if Heather would listen to the girls' urging to wear a shrug over the low-cut, strappy red dress Heather had chosen. Heather had worn the dress once before when she and Ashley attended a wedding with Ashley's mom. Ashley remembered her mom's quickly hidden look of surprise when Heather entered the car. Privately, Ashley had thought Heather looked pretty sexy—not that Ashley would ever *say* that to anyone!

She quickly turned her thoughts away from Heather and toward her other friend's choices. Working from an inspiration garnered from an old *Cosmogirl Prom!*, Brittney had found the ideal dress for Suzie online. After a bit of begging, Suzie's parents had agreed to buy the sleeveless, high-necked dress that perfectly showcased her toned arms and slender athletic build.

As for Brittney, Ashley admired her friend's creative flair and knew that she would look amazing, as always. Brittany planned to combine a simple, vintage Audrey-Hepburn-style dress, spiced up with a chunky rhinestone necklace and two secretly purchased items: Victoria's Secret stockings with a seam running up the back and tall silver heels! Brittney confided to Ashley on the phone that she would don the last two items only *after* she left home and her mother could no longer stop her.

Now Ashley's Abercrombie skirt ensemble that the girls had collaborated on no longer seemed right. It's just not *me*, Ashley thought to herself. All the other girls had found outfits that expressed their identities.

Of course, maybe the real problem was that Ashley just wasn't sure who she was anyhow! When it came down to it, Ashley admitted to herself, she didn't really care about Jake or what he thought of her outfit at all. She even didn't care about clothes all that much. But, she wasn't a sporty girl like Suzie, or a fashionista like Brittany, or certainly not a boy-crazy girl like Heather.

So, who was she? A loyal friend to her girlfriends? A good girl, like her mother always said, who studied hard so she could go to college one day? Would she someday be Jake's girlfriend? Or was she someone else entirely? Perhaps . . . dare she dream . . . could she join the drama club and someday star in a reality TV show like her favorite, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*? Even now, Ashley still loved the show because of many good memories of sneaking in episodes with her friends when their parents weren't around. They had many whispered conversations about Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé's scandalous and glamorous lives and loves!

Quit dreaming, Ashley thought to herself dejectedly. You just don't have style, money, or a bod like any of the Kardashian sisters.

She pushed her clothes hangers aside in frustration. Whoever she was . . . whoever she was becoming . . ., Ashley doubted any of those answers were in her closet. She turned away in confusion.

For Further Thought and Reflection

1. In this story, how does marketing move beyond simple print or television ads? Do the girls themselves promote consumption through the interactions and activities that they do for fun?
2. List the products like beauty brands, music, and movies that are referenced from print, broadcast, or online media through this case. How do entertainment mass media *content* and celebrity worship complement and enhance marketing messages?
3. Looking at your product list from the second question, what do marketing messages about these products directly state or imply about socio-economic class, sexuality, and femininity? How does this influence each girl's self-concept, feelings of self-worth, and decision-making? How do the girls in this story both resist and embrace these messages?

4. What messages about idealized body types and sexual appearance are present in the marketing messages you identified in the first question? Identify two instances where one of the girls accepts the message. Identify two instances where one of the girls rejects or challenges the message. What interactions have led to this rejection or challenge? How do mass media messages and messages from other sources about sexuality and attractiveness contradict one another in this story?
5. Keep a log of marketing messages you encounter in one day of your everyday life including traditional ads, peer-to-peer marketing, product placement, “advertorials” (brand names included as creative content in magazines or programs), viral marketing (e.g., funny video on YouTube), and other forms of online and digital (e.g., video games) marketing. Then answer the following: What types of idealized femininities, masculinities, socio-economic classes, and sexualities are portrayed? How might these repeated messages influence identity?

References

- Currie, D.H. (1999). *Girl talk: Adolescent magazines and their readers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Duits, L., & van Romondt Vis, P. (2007). *Girls make sense: Girls, celebrities, and identities*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA.
- FisherKeller, J. (2007). How do kids' self-identities relate to media experiences in everyday life? In S.R. Mazzarella (Ed.) *20 questions about youth and the media*. (pp. 225–237). New York: Peter Lang.
- Johnson, N.R. (2010). Consuming desires: Consumption, romance, and sexuality in bestselling teen romance novels. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 33, 54–73.
- Labre, M.P., & Walsh-Childers, K. (2003). Friendly advice? Beauty messages in Web sites of teen magazines. *Mass Communication & Society*, 6, 379–396.
- Lamb, S., & Brown, L.M. (2006). *Packaging girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers' schemes*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Mazzarella, S.R., & Atkins, A. (forthcoming). “Community, content, and commerce”: Alloy.com and the commodification of tween/teen girl communities. In S.R. Mazzarella (Ed.). *Girl wide web 2.0: Revisiting girls, the Internet, and the negotiation of identity*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Quart, A. (2003). *Branded: The buying and selling of teenagers*. Cambridge Center, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- The author wishes to thank her nieces, Alisha, Amanda, and Marissa, for their invaluable suggestions for the storyline in this case.