



HEALTH AND WELLNESS

'Sexy baby,' 'Sexy Handmaid's Tale': Have Halloween costumes gone too far?

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As Halloween approaches, an influx of sexy costumes begin filling the hangers in stores.

It started as the standard sexy angel, sexy pirate, sexy cheerleader. And now there's sexy Donald Trump's, sexy anonymous op-eds and even sexy pizza rats.

Sexy Halloween costumes are everywhere. But are they a problem?

Some women say Sexy Halloween is empowering. But experts raise concerns that the practice reinforces harmful notions that women must dress provocatively to be accepted.

"It's a sad irony that the one day of the year when people are free to play and experiment and explore ways of being outside of the everyday, so many women still feel that they have to dress sexy in order to be interesting or desirable," says Juliet Williams, a professor of gender studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Sexy Halloween: When it comes to sexy Halloween, women just can't win

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Why women feel pressured to dress sexy on Halloween

Halloween is a microcosm of women's daily struggles. Women are pressured to appeal to the male gaze, but when they show too much skin or cleavage, they're ridiculed and shamed.

"We live in a society where women are judged mainly on their physical attractiveness," says Annalisa Castaldo, the director of the gender, women and sexuality studies at Widener University. "Halloween therefore becomes a pressure point, a valve that you can be as sexy as you need to be for one night of the year, without anyone telling them they're wrong."

We see this in the popularity of sexy costumes: Store shelves are rife with sexy-anything, even when they barely resemble the thing they're supposed to emulate.

Experts worry this marketing is so pervasive that many women are choosing sexy costumes by default.

"It's become so standard that there's almost no other way of approaching Halloween for women... Any costume has to be about sexuality," Castaldo says. "There's no creativity or experimentation. Women are expected only to choose the clothes that show off their breast, legs, butt."

Sexy baby, Sexy Handmaid's Tale: When 'sexy' costumes become problematic, not empowering

Experts say there's a difference between feeling sexy and being sexualized.

"Sexualization is sort of passive. It's when you're being sexualized by others. Being sexy to me feels like an embodied, empowering thing," clarifies Erin Hipple, an assistant professor of social work at West Chester University

Sometimes sexy costumes have multiple layers of harm.

The Sexy "Handmaid's Tale" costume, based on the Hulu series about rape victims, was criticized for being insensitive to survivors of sexual assault.

"We have to recognize these Halloween costumes aren't just about having fun all the time. It's also about honoring the severity of our shared social problems and just showing a basic level of respect to every victim of child sexual abuse or sexual assault," Williams says. "I don't think there's any excuse, even one night, making a joke of it."

Review: How long can 'The Handmaid's Tale' go on like this?

Sexual assault trauma: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is explaining something about trauma. Experts say we should listen.

Lauri Hyers, a social psychologist and professor at West Chester University, says some costumes are part of a bigger trend of merging sexualization with infantilization.

Just look at Sexy Baby: less clothes with a pacifier and bib. Or Sexy Eleven from "Stranger Things," based on Millie Bobby Brown's 12-year-old character from the Netflix series. And of course, the ever-present sexy schoolgirl.

Hyers says many Halloween costumes use child-like images that typically convey innocence, like polka dots and pigtails, and incorporate them into sexy, adult looks.

"That merging of infantilization and sexualization to market to youth is a really dangerous combination, because then it starts to sexualize innocence itself," she says. "Childishness and innocence gets connected with sexualization."

Wellness: How we've failed Millie Bobby Brown

She adds that this sexualization can be confusing to children. "Children look to adults and how they want to emulate them. That's what dress-up is all about:

putting on adult clothes. And marketers know that, and they sexualize it to make it appealing to younger and younger audiences."

'Be your own sexy.'

Restricting or condemning sexy costumes isn't the answer to the objectification and judgment women face.

Instead, women need to have options that go beyond sexualized TV characters or occupations.

"If the market has been saturated in such a way that sexy is most of what's available, it's not about restricting those options. It's about expanding them, so that the individual can self-determine how they want to dress," Hipple explains.

Experts say women can express sexuality without abiding by pre-conceived and sexist notions of what "sexy" is.

"The standard sexy is cleavage, short skirt, high heels, but there are many ways to do sexy," says Castaldo. "Why not be sexy goth with black lipstick and stompy boots? That's empowering."

Williams concludes: "If we gave girls and women more permission to imagine possibilities outside of standard norms of sexiness, they would experience Halloween as more freeing."

Halloween costume ideas: 11 pop-culture Halloween costumes for 2021, from that Bernie meme to 'Bridgerton'