

MANIC METALLIC

FASHION IS A DISCIPLINE AND AN ART

≡ shop + editorials books personalities reviews + podcast subscribe sign in + 🔍 🛒

Americans and Nudity: It's Complicated



BY LIBERTY IMHOFF · MAY 20, 2020



Kate Moss & Mark Wahlberg for Calvin Klein

Nudity, by definition, is the absence of clothing on the human body. So, what does nudity have to do with fashion? And wouldn't it seem that the success of nudity as an accepted concept in the public sphere leaves no room for the success of an industry built on coverings for the figure?

And why, pray tell, do Americans have such a hard time accepting nudity as an integrated part of daily life?

Let's talk about it, because it is a key part of the fashion industry – paradoxical though that may seem. Nudity is the natural state of humanity. When we come out of the womb, we are wearing no clothing. In American society, as growth occurs, we begin to receive messages that our bodies are not adequate. We are told to cover up as children and teenagers – especially as young women – so that we do not cause a disturbance. The more skin that we allow to be visible, the more (in society's view) that we put ourselves at risk of sexual harm. And we, as children, must be protected. But is that the whole reason that nudity in American society is not accepted and is, in fact, shamed?

No, it is not.



America is, and has always been, a country that sees religion as sizably important in the lives of its citizenry. According to [Gallup](#), 65% of Americans say that religion is relevant to their daily lives. Compare that with countries that are more lenient with their acceptance of norms of nudity like France (30%) or Japan (24%), and the United States looks positively pious.

The interesting thing about this concept of American religiosity is that American behaviors don't actually conform to the sense of religious piety from which citizens derive many of their long-held beliefs. By age 44, [95% of Americans](#) have had premarital sex, which is frowned upon in the Bible. As of 2018, Americans gave the porn website Pornhub its [most traffic of the top 20 countries](#) that visited the site. And [84% of Americans](#) have masturbated at some point in their lives.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of the above behaviors. However, when placed alongside the insistence that nudity be outlawed or severely limited in public spheres by many citizens within its borders, it belies a stark inconsistency in what Americans condone versus what they do. In other words, there is a frustrating ethos of "do as I say, not as I do".

 A nude woman

As we can now see, Americans have a fraught relationship with the concept of sexuality, and the problem of nudity is an extension of this underlying issue. When US citizens see naked bodies, for the most part, they see sex. Therefore, when they see bodies that are not clothed, a wide range of complicated emotions come to the surface. Disgust. Apprehension. Fear. Anxiety. Lust. Temptation. That is how Americans have been socialized to think about sex. It is this automatic equation of nakedness with sex that is particularly problematic within our society – and which is a roadblock to building an environment where the nude human body is seen as integral to our lives.

The argument is also frequently made that the hypersexualization of women in media is reason enough to cut down on nudity in public forums. After all, we cannot treat women like sex objects; we must respect them for their intellectual capacities. No argument there; as a woman, I appreciate this sentiment. The issue, though, again comes down to this: a naked body does not equal sex. Sex is not necessarily implied when viewing a nude or partially nude body.

In One Piece



American Apparel™
Made in Downtown LA
Sweatshop Free – Brand-Free Clothes

Retail Locations:

Atlanta—Duckhead
3400 Ashford Lane, Road N.E.
Larkin Shopping Center
Phone: (404) 852-0010

Atlanta—Little Five Points
1125 Euclid Ave. N.E.
(On the same street as Variety Playhouse)
Phone: (404) 866-8811

Charlotte—King Street
244 King St.
Rialto Mallon (Sally's Park)
Phone: (843) 853-7920

Columbia—E. of South Carolina
819 Hayden St.
(Btw. Devine St. & Stopover St.)
Phone: (803) 521-5117

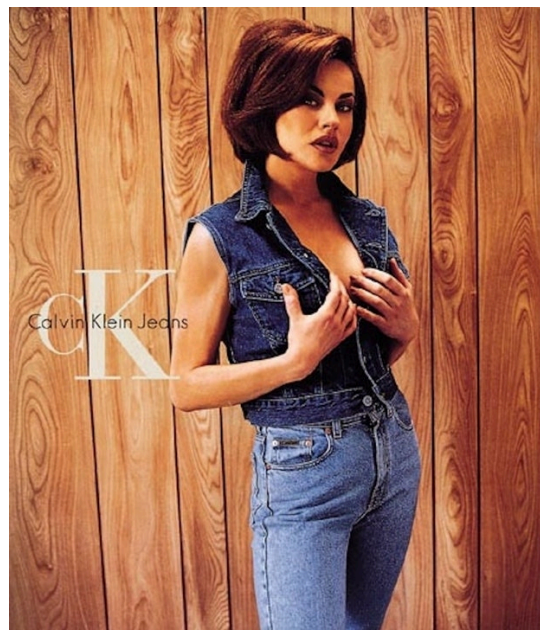
Charlotte—Southpark Mall
4400 Sharon Rd.
By Charlotte
Phone: (704) 365-4344

Charlotte—South End
1004 Camden Rd., Suite #300
(Behind St. Light rail)
Phone: (704) 342-0140

americanapparel.net

Miranda Kerr for American Apparel

The fashion industry has frequently been at the forefront of this viewpoint. Take ads from the pre-bankruptcy version of American Apparel. The brand's advertisements were seen by many to be smutty and over the top with their nudity/partial nudity. American Apparel's old ethos used to be that they were American-made. The ads were provocative, to be sure, but if the country's population was not so convinced that nudity = sex, then there would have been no harm done (though, who's to say whether or not that would have saved them from bankruptcy).



A Calvin Klein ad

Or, how about the Calvin Klein ads of the 1990s (some of which can be seen [here](#))? Those did involve clothes, for the most part, but many still employed partial nudity. The public had many heart attacks and conniptions. Looking back on them now, they seem relatively benign.



Helena Christensen for Chanel, F/W 1991

Fashion has always been willing to push the envelope when it comes to cultural norms. Look at these [1990s catwalks](#) for reference. Nudity is such a normal part of fashion culture that many don't bat an eyelash anymore when it is seen. It is in fashion's interest to have nudity become more accepted because to repress nakedness is to repress expression. And to repress expression is to repress innovation – which the fashion industry, along with other creative professions, needs in order to thrive.

When will the rest of American society catch up to this line of thinking? And, if it did, is nudity legally protected?

America is a country that was founded on the principle of freedom. Five of those freedoms are specifically mentioned in the First Amendment of the [United States Constitution](#):

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”



Philadelphia Naked Bike Ride

In that case, one would expect that nudity is constitutionally protected as a means of freedom of expression. That isn't so. The question of nudity being either illegal or legal is generally left to individual state and local governments to determine. Look at the laws in the US state of Pennsylvania. It is illegal in this state to "commit indecent exposure", yet Philadelphia – the state's largest city – is home to the country's 2nd largest Naked Bike Ride (behind Portland, Oregon). Also, there are designated places in the US for nudity to occur, such as certain beaches, but it is entirely possible to be cited for indecency for being nude in one's own yard.

The question of where America's hesitance to accept nudity originates certainly has its roots in religion, but that's not the entire story. Religion in the US is tied in closely with the politics of both major political parties. In the case of the Democratic Party, religion is used as a unifying force – all religions are accepted, and religious-tinged rhetoric is frequently used in political speeches. Catholics and other liberal Christians tend to support them. The Republican Party tends to lean heavily toward evangelical Christian members and adheres strongly to socially conservative values.

Religion influences our politics. There's no question about it. We are "one nation under God, indivisible". Our Pledge of Allegiance says so; the addition of "under God" occurred under the Eisenhower administration (Republican) as a response to the Communist fear of the 1950s.

Republicans are seen to be conservative, and Democrats are seen to be liberal, but both are decidedly more conservative than most other powerful parties in other Western nations.



The last point to be made is a reference back to an earlier item, which I'll now expand upon: the desire to protect children. For example, the Parents Television Council closely watches what comes across television stations to ensure that nothing

unseemly is broadcast when children would be likely to view it. They frequently notify the [Federal Communications Commission](#) when unsatisfactory moments (unsatisfactory to them) happen, like curse words, nudity, and other indecent instances. There have been Supreme Court cases that have given broadcast networks a bit more leeway with what they show. This serves to demonstrate, though, that there is a strong emphasis on shielding young minds from obscene actions.


It sounds good in theory, but it is disingenuous in practice. If America wanted to protect its youth, it would enact gun control laws so that children would not have to live in fear of going to school to get an education. It would not expose them to such high levels of violence from young ages. It would ensure that every child had health care so that they could live long and happy lives. It would take action to close the wealth gap in this country so that [1 in 5 children wouldn't live in poverty](#). Having a child see a nude body – which, considering that bodies are not inherently sexual vessels, and are quite natural – seems to pale in comparison.

Some of the US is moving in a more progressive direction on this issue in which the fashion industry has always been ahead of the curve. And when these restrictive societal norms change, it will be long overdue.

To subscribe to *The [Manic Metallic](#) Podcast*, [click here](#). To follow us on Instagram, [click here](#).

Subscribe To The Manic Metallic Newsletter

You'll receive our takes on fashion news, our company updates, artist spotlights, fashion cultural recommendations, and more!

Email Address 
First Name
Last Name

SUBSCRIBE NOW

We use Mailchimp as our marketing platform. By subscribing, you acknowledge that your information will be transferred to Mailchimp for processing. Learn more about Mailchimp's privacy practices [here](#).