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Critics Are Saying 'That's Too Hot' of Sexy Carl's Jr. Ad

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As in a racy music video, a scantily clad Paris Hilton cavorts with a water hose as she washes a black Bentley, while singer Eleni Mandell's sultry version of Cole Porter's "I Love Paris" pulsates throughout.

After a sensuous sudsing of the Bentley and herself, Hilton takes a bite out of a new Carl's Jr. hamburger. Hilton's image then fades to a tagline echoing the reality TV star's two-word mantra: "That's hot." Perhaps a little too hot.

Since premiering late last week, the Hilton burger commercial is getting the kind of attention Carl's Jr. wanted. But the ad's blatant sexual overtones are getting under the skin of critics, who say it sets a new low in

TV advertising.

"This commercial is basically soft-core porn," said Melissa Caldwell, research director for the Parents Television Council. "It's inappropriate for television."

The Los Angeles-based advocacy group plans to mobilize its more than 1 million members to protest and is considering petitioning the Federal Communications Commission for a ruling on whether the advertisements are indecent.

For parent company CKE Restaurants Inc. of Carpinteria, Hilton has proved an effective way to get attention for the spicy new burger she was hired to sell. The company said that its website even crashed on Friday as people clamored to view an expanded version of the commercial.

Carl's Jr. marketing chief Brad Haley was unavailable for comment Monday. In a promotional video on the company's website, he explained the concept as: "Great-looking actress, great-looking car, great-looking burger, that's pretty much the idea."

Claudia Caplan, chief marketing officer for Mendelsohn Zein Advertising in Los Angeles, said the agency designed the commercial to play off Hilton's notoriety and grab the attention of Carl's Jr.'s target demographic of 18-to-34-year-old men. "Look, we're never going to have McDonald's advertising budget or Burger King's budget," Caplan said. "Whatever we do has to have an effect that is multiplied over several platforms. It needs to be more than just a television commercial."

The granddaughter of hotel magnate Barron Hilton, Paris Hilton became an Internet legend when a sex tape shot by her then-boyfriend showed up on the Web. Hilton later starred in the Fox reality show "The Simple Life," which showed the 24-year-old heiress and a friend doing ordinary jobs, including a failed effort working at a fast-food restaurant.

The Hilton ad is the latest in a string of controversial, often suggestive ads for Carl's Jr. that show how far the company has come from the days when it was run by founder Carl Karcher. The prominent Orange County Republican once had a statue of St. Francis of Assisi placed in the foyer of the company's Anaheim headquarters.

Since Karcher was ousted as chairman in 1993, the company has hired the likes of former basketball bad boy Dennis Rodman and Playboy founder Hugh Hefner for its commercials. Now 88, Karcher could not be reached for comment.

Recently, Mendelsohn created for Carl's Jr. a commercial showing a woman gyrating on a mechanical bull while taking bites of a burger. In another, young men ogle a pretty woman and take bets on whether she will spill a juicy Carl's burger on her blouse.

Stuart Fischhoff, a media psychologist at Cal State Los Angeles, said the Hilton commercial went well beyond other Carl's ads targeted at young men and boys. "This could come back and bite them in the behind," Fischhoff said. "We're in the throes of a culture war in this country, and for them to be pushing the envelope like this at this time could be very dangerous."

Knowing the media's infatuation with Hilton, Carl's and its ad agency gave a sneak look to "Entertainment Tonight." They also built a separate website called SpicyParis.com to play a 60-second version of the commercial.

In the last few days, spots ran during sports programs, on ABC's "Desperate Housewives" finale Sunday and on the season-ending episodes of Fox's "The O.C." and NBC's "The Apprentice." A similar ad with Hilton for CKE's Hardee's hamburger chain is expected to air next month.

Executives at Los Angeles television stations said they had received few complaints about the commercial's content. Whether its message is effective is another matter.

Peter Sealey, adjunct marketing professor at UC Berkeley, said that although the ad might be remembered by viewers, it might ultimately hurt the Carl's Jr. brand.

"This is the ultimate in bimbo advertising," Sealey said. "If you are Hooters and you have buxom young waitresses, that's fine. But Carl's Jr. is more mainstream. They've got families going in there."