

Posted on Wed, Aug. 18, 2010

Mirror, Mirror: 'Eat, Pray, Love' and don't forget Buy: The latest movie product tie-ins



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If there is one thing fashion's French-manicured fingers shouldn't have touched, it was Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir-turned-movie *Eat Pray Love*.

Why? Because Gilbert was a lot of things on her journey to self-discovery: nervous, petulant, generous, greedy, even sexy. But one thing's for sure: Gilbert was not fashion-forward.

The 334-page book is a personal story about a depressed and confused thirtysomething divorcee who abandoned her material possessions to travel to Italy, India, and Indonesia to figure herself out. During her journey to self-discovery, she gained 23 pounds, scrubbed temple floors, and traversed hilly terrain on a rickety bicycle.

What she didn't do was rock Dana Buchman tunics or light Yankee Candles in her room at the ashram, as Kohl's is trying to get us to do.

And Kohl's is not alone. The number of online promotions linking products with the pure and simple *EPL* is staggering: eDressme.com is hosting a sale through Tuesday promoting hip boutique labels such as Al & Alicia, Chaudry, and Buckle by ecoSkin. Early this month, HSN.com hosted a three-day sale of clothing, jewelry, and home decor, including state-of-the-art pasta makers, "inspired" by the places where Gilbert traveled.

A joint promotion between Amazon.com and Endless.com promises a pair of \$51 Franco Sarto aviator sunglasses, a \$200-plus Christys of London safari hat, and gladiator sandals that will put me on the road to *Eat Pray Love* nirvana. And one of my favorite cosmetics companies, Fresh, has practically sold out of three perfumes it produced with Gilbert-lovers in mind. They are: "Eat," "Pray," and "Love."

Ai-yi-yi.

The practice of promotional tie-ins isn't the issue here. Banana Republic's "Mad Men" promotion has succeeded in getting me excited about shopping there - and the concept makes sense. If you're going for the *Mad Men* look, Banana Republic can deliver. Even the marketing for *Sex and the City* and *Sex and the City 2* was spot-on. Dress like Carrie or Miranda in vibrant Balenciaga (or Balenciaga-inspired) maxi dresses. After all, *SATC* is all about shopping.

But the feeble attempts to link the latest in style to Gilbert's self-awakening are ridiculous - insulting, even. And the message isn't subtle: If you buy products from (or inspired by) Italy, India, and Indonesia, you too can have a life-changing experience.

Gilbert came to be in her predicament partly because she was trying to live the life prescribed by her peers and family, rather than creating her own authentic experiences. Trying to live up to other people's ideals often, if not always, includes being a slave to fashion because appearances become so important.

So not only were appearances the last thing on the author's mind, but why is anyone trying to sell a copycat experience of a fully authentic existence?

And how do \$55 Bensimon tennis shoes fit into the story?

I kid you not, even as I sit here writing this, an e-mail from New York-based Think PR is urging me to urge you to "steal Julia Roberts' international style" and buy these sneakers. Please note, the e-mail says, Roberts is actually wearing Bensimon in the movie!

Does that mean my beat-up running shoes will impede my personal journey to nirvana?

Why do companies think a new chick flick compels women to whip out their plastic? Have we proven ourselves to be that gullible?

Not at all, says Maddy Dychtwald, author of *Influence: How Women's Soaring Economic Power Will Transform Our World for the Better* (Hyperion Voice, 2010).

In fact, women are more often the target audience precisely because they have fared better than men during the latest recession. Women make 80 percent of all consumer purchases in the United States, and that translates to \$5 trillion annually.

So, marketers think, why not appeal to women's hearts and get them to spend a little surplus income?

Apparently, the message gets jumbled because marketers often view women, no matter their experience, as young and unsophisticated, Dychtwald said. (More than 90 percent of women feel misunderstood by marketers, she said.)

"This is a perfect example of that."

Javier Bardem may also be perfect, but he doesn't fit the story, either.

"What's so special about this book is Gilbert got beyond the superficial to the authentic, and these promotional tie-ins trivialize that experience," Dychtwald said.

My feelings exactly.

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