

It's Bad for Us Too: How the Sexualization of Girls Impacts the Sexuality of Boys, Men, and Women

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Introduction

Emerging evidence suggests that the sexualization of girls has particular negative consequences on girls' development into healthy adult sexuality (see Lamb, this volume; see also Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006; Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Tolman, 2000; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). While it creates problems for girls, it may be less obvious that the sexualization of girls impacts the sexuality of women, men and boys. In this chapter, I will present the evidence for and theorize how it is indeed bad for boys, men's and women's sexuality as well. The sexual objectification of women itself has been reshaped by the saturation of society in sexualized images of girls. From a developmental perspective, imposing adult sexuality onto girls has a boomerang effect on men's and boys' expectations about what women and their sexuality are or should be like, and on women's conceptions of, beliefs about, and experiences of their own sexuality.

The chapter is separated into three sections. The first section is dedicated to the impact of the sexualization of girls on boys' sexuality development and men's sexuality. The second section will cover the impact on adult women's sexuality. The third and final section addresses a striking recent phenomenon and subject of vociferous debate in both popular culture and academia in response to the Report: the question of whether the sexualization of girls may be a route to positive sexuality and sexual empowerment for young women (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2009; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009a, 2009b; Vanvesenbeek, 2009).

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Impact on Boys and Men

The sexualization of girls and women is endemic in the sexual socialization of boys and in the subsequent sexuality of men. One of the definitions of sexualization outlined in the Report is sexual objectification. The sexualization of girls has affected the ways in which women are sexually objectified, bootstrapping girlhood into the forms that women's sexual objectification now takes, what Gail Dines (2009) has called "childification" of women in these portrayals. In still images, videos, and movies, the imposition of adult sexuality onto girls serves to normalize it, diminishing the sense of shock or concern that such images might have generated in the past. She also notes that such images are more pervasive with the technological development of computer-generated images of sexualized girls in pornography, a work-around to laws that prevent those under 18 to participate in its production, producing "barely legal" models, all of which are disseminated as what "real women" are or should be like. I will review the media research on how the sexualization of girls affects male sexuality and its development and then consider research informing our understanding of its impact on adult men's sexuality and intimate relationships.

Impact on Boys' and Men's Media: Sexualization of Girls in Old and New Technologies

The confluence of the sexualization of girls and its impact on the sexual objectification of women occurs in sexualized media aimed at boys and men,

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as both producing and providing contexts for the development of male sexuality and its expression. The pervasiveness and popularity of these sexually saturated genres continues to expand, in form and accessibility, in media comprised of print, network and cable television, movies, and new more interactive technologies, including the Internet and video gaming. Dines (2009) analyzes how the sexualization of girls is part and parcel of the current landscape of pornography in multiple venues, including the Internet, magazines (in particular "lad mags" such as *Maxim*), but such images are no longer confined to the admittedly ineffectively regulated arena of official pornography. What has been called the "pornification" of mainstream culture is a disturbing trend that not only increases sexualized images of girls and women geometrically but also normalizes the sexualization of girls and generates unreal and unattainable notions of "normal" women (see also Jensen, 2007; Paul, 2005). That is, the "spilling" of pornographic imagery out of formalized pornography into mainstream venues, such as music videos, cable television and iPhone apps (Diaz, 2009), suggests the importance of considering media effects research on pornography as salient to everyday interactions with a broad array of media.

Video games are an especially problematic new arena in which the sexual objectification of women has been documented. Research has demonstrated that virtually the only way women are portrayed is as sex objects, even in the rare instance that a woman is the heroine or star of the game (Burgess, Stermer & Burgess, 2007). The interplay between sexualization and violence is particularly disturbing in this medium, as the user of games is actually "doing" (virtually) the actions that are being portrayed; the interactive quality is cause for concern (Dill & Dill, 1998; Dill & Thill, 2007). Yao, Mahood & Linz (2010), Dill & Dill (1998), and Dietz (1998) found that video games are powerful agents of socialization, and that male participants who played a sexually explicit vs. a nonsexual game were much more likely to view and treat women as sex objects. In particular, Dill & Dill (1998) found that a preponderance of games, especially those most popular with younger teenage males, emphasizes masculinity as tied to power, dominance, and

aggression over women, coupled with images of femininity as tied to inferiority, sexual objectification and enjoyment of or attraction to male sexual aggression. While there is not yet an extensive empirical literature, this growing body of evidence regarding relatively mild or "soft" portrayals as in video games constitutes cause for concern (Ezzell, 2009).

While boys are exposed to images of men "consuming" women's bodies as objects of their desire in G-rated movies (Martin & Kazzyak, 2009), they are bombarded as never before with sexualized images of girls and women on the Internet. This pervasiveness has produced a new phenomenon: boys (and girls) as young as 10 years old are inadvertently but regularly exposed to pornographic images and video (Davies, 2004; Greenfield, 2004). In addition, ubiquitous pornographic images on the Internet—both pretend and real—have yielded more intentional viewing (e.g., in 2006, 90% of boys and 70% of girls aged 13 and 14 had accessed sexually explicit media at least once in the previous year (cited in Ezzell, 2009)). The phenomenon of tweens and young teens viewing these images is not limited to individuals seeking out this content by themselves. Young people's exposure is also on the rise due to the skyrocketing popularity of Internet-based social networking (such as Facebook and MySpace) that has become a regular part of boys' and girls' everyday lives. Insidious effects of this daily dosage of sexualized images constituting "business as usual" is that it both normalizes and numbs. In the context of such networks, young people construct components of this sexualized environments themselves (Greenfield, 2004), posting pictures of sexed-up girls and youthful-looking sexy women depicted as filled with desire for the young men who are looking at them. Constant interactive engagement with such portraits may be yielding an inadvertent and problematic sex education for boys (and girls).

There is no doubt that viewing pornography is part of the informal (and often only) sexuality education of the vast majority of boys, who have ever-easier access to these ever-younger sexually objectified females. Research demonstrates that some young men who watch pornography begin to derive sexual pleasure *only* from viewing

pornography and from sexually objectifying women (Paul, 2005; see also Kimmel, 2008). Paul (2005) observed that the pervasiveness of more violent and humiliating pornography not only creates specific conditions for individual men to require an intensified level of sexual objectification but also infuses "enabling conditions" for male violence against girls and women (see also Attwood, 2005b). In what ways might adolescent boys' easier access to and likely increased use of such pornography to facilitate masturbation be shaping the sexuality development of boys and young men?

Research into this phenomenon has documented negative impacts with younger men, including unreal expectations of women's desires and behaviors, scripts to enable "breaking" women's resistance, intensification of sexual objectification of women, seeing sex with partners as boring, habituation and desensitization and normalization of aggressive sexuality (Attwood, 2005b; Jensen, 2007; Paul, 2007). Linz, Donnerstein & Penrod (1988) established the desensitization effects of sexually degrading explicit and non-explicit films on beliefs about rape and the sexual objectification of women. The notion that "the more extreme, the more interesting the depiction is" is perpetuated by YouTube and the many vehicles outside of the official pornography industry that are unregulated and possibly unregulatable, in which such portrayals are pervasive.

Impact on Male Sexuality and Intimate Relationships

Objectifying another person is premised on the absence of empathy (Herman, 1992). A number of researchers have described how losing or not developing the capacity to empathize is problematic for, and undermining of, relationship building and maintenance (Kimmel, 2006; Kindlon & Thompson, 1998), which diminishes the humanity of boys and men themselves (Brooks, 1995). Studies of adult men's sexuality and difficulties with intimacy and in intimate relationships, and with younger men's interactions with and attitudes about young women as sexual and romantic partners, are beginning to suggest such patterns (Burn & Ward, 2005;

England, Shafer & Fogarty, 2007; Loftus, 2002; Weaver, Masland & Zillmann, 1984), and research suggests these patterns may differ by race and class (i.e., Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Weekes, 2002). There is evidence that men who are exposed to soft core porn or mainstream sexualized images of girls are more likely to find their own partners less attractive and intimacy more difficult (Kendrick & Gutierrez, 1980; Schooler & Ward, 2006). Several experimental studies have shown that exposure to pornography leads men to indicate less satisfaction with their intimate partners' attractiveness, sexual performance, and level of affection and to express greater desire for sex without emotional involvement (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). The infusing of the sexualization of girls into pornography is likely to intensify these reactions and expectations.

One of the central ways that boys and men establish and maintain masculinity is through the sexual objectification of women. The pressure to prove manhood begins in earnest in puberty (Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso & Porche, 2003; Tolman, 2006), and the closest targets are the girls around them (Quinn, 2002). If boys are engaging with more and more mainstreamed and violent formal and informal pornography at younger ages through more interactive media, such sources may be how boys are learning sexual scripts and what is sexually exciting. Unreal portrayals of girls being sexually ravenous and ready at all times, who have bodies that are physically impossible to achieve or maintain in terms of the size and look of sexual parts, thinness, and looking perennially young, without comparable exposure to other images of girls and women, may be creating expectations and "sexual maps" that are not viable in real relationships. The growing phenomenon of boys and young men tapping or web casting sexual assaults on women (i.e., Dobbin, 2008; see also Ezzell, 2009), reflecting the sense of normalization that is surrounding these behaviors, also raises the specter of spectating—are boys learning to watch rather than to experience their sexuality? Is their sexual experience about sexual feelings or is it becoming intertwined with an increasing need to feel in control in a world that feels more and more out of control?

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Kimmel (2008) observes how the sexual objectification of young women has been normalized for young men in what they do as well as what they see; in the guise of bonding, Kimmel found that young men are working hard to prove their masculinity to themselves and one another. He recounts how young men sexualize and objectify young women as a group activity (see also Tolman, et al., 2003), characterized by intensified expressions of aggression and violence that bode poorly for the development of intimacy, vulnerability, or mutuality with women as intimate and sexual partners into adulthood (Burn & Ward, 2005; Kimmel, 2008). Stomblor (1994) recorded such behavior as fundamental to fraternity life. As Levy (2005) points out, women's collusion or participation in this process may yield more attributions of sexuality to women's behaviors than intended and render dating a context in which men may oversexualize women (Lindgren, Hoda & George, 2007; Rudman & Borgida, 1995). The antithetical adherence to a strong sexual double standard by both men and women, even as women are incited by ostensibly "normal" circumstances to appear "slutty" or "pornified" (Levy, 2005; Sweeney, 2008; see below), may in fact make pathways to healthy adult sexuality ever more obscure, confusing and littered with obstacles for young men (O'Sullivan & Majerovich, 2008).

There is some research indicating that young men report their wish for women to be the initiators in sexual and relational encounters, to share the "burden" of risk of rejection with women (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2007) rather than have women be only objects of their desire. However, at the same time, there is ample evidence that young women are also held accountable to a standard of femininity that reserves an ironically safer place for them as appealing only if they are not overly aggressive initiators of sexual interactions (McRobbie, 2009). The tighter tightrope that the dual desire of young men to have more egalitarian scripts regarding initiation (and risk of rejection) with persistent pressure to treat young women as sexual objects may be confusing and undermine intimacy for both men and women (Levy, 2005; Bogle, 2008).

Impact on Adult Women

The sexualization of girls means that the impetus to be sexually attractive and desirable, to become a "good" sexual object, exerts a shaping force long before adult sexuality emerges. It also means that sexual objectification itself is looking younger. Women are not socialized to embrace their sexuality as part of themselves but to be "good girls" (who grow up to be "good women"), who are not supposed to have strong sexual feelings, needs, or wishes of their own. In fact, these two dimensions of female sexual socialization are intertwined, as objects do not have feelings (Tolman & Debold, 1993). I will review two arenas of effects: the impact of the "youthification" of female sexual desirability on women and the impact of being socialized as an increasingly "youthified" sexual object rather than a mature sexual being on sexual functioning and on negotiating sexuality in heterosexual relationships. I will then illuminate how these impacts are exploited with the example of the fitness industry, creating and then relieving while further complicating the pressure to stay (and equate) young, "healthy," and attractive.

Youthification of Female Sexual Desirability

The sexualization of girls is problematic for girls on many fronts, as this book and the Report attest, including inappropriately imposing adult sexuality on them. The inappropriate sexuality in the case of adult women, however, is the "youthification" of female sexuality, the pervasiveness and cultural imposition of a youthful ideal of beauty (sexual appeal) and also the sexualization of young female bodies as a narrow ideal. In an era when young and younger is the new sexier and sexier, aging itself becomes a risk not because of an increase in sexual dysfunction but because of exclusion from the category of sexually attractive (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Youthification of sexual attractiveness poses unnatural and unattainable limits on available images and embodiments for women as they inevitably age. Women being fearful that getting older disqualifies them from being sexually appealing (to some men) may not be groundless.

Studies demonstrate that exposure to pornography leads to some men's diminished interest in their real-life partners and unrealistic expectations for their partners' appearance and sexual behavior (i.e., Kendrick & Gutierrez, 1980). The "youthification" of sexual objectification as an effect of the sexualization of girls intensifies and imparts another dimension to women's anxiety about aging and having a thin, youthful-looking body (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

Middle age and older women, whose naturally aging bodies contrast more and more with the omnipresence of young "sexy" bodies, have become vulnerable target consumer groups for many cosmetic surgeries designed to make their bodies look sexier by making them look younger, eliminating and undoing the aging process. Cosmetic surgeries as a new option for achieving that forever younger sexy body has become normalized through reality makeover shows (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006), though in actual reality it is accessible only to a privileged few who can afford extraordinarily expensive procedures not covered by insurance. Data from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons show that common procedures designed to keep women's bodies looking young and sexually attractive have been steadily increasing. Between 2000 and 2005, annual rates of Botox injections rose from roughly three quarters of a million to almost 4 million, amounting to a 388% increase. In the same 5-year period, there was also a 115% increase in tummy tucks annually and a 283% increase in buttock lifts (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2006b). Evidence that these procedures reflect adult women's attempts to retain a sexy young body is in the age differentials for these procedures: the rates for women 35–50 years of age who receive breast lifts, buttock lifts, tummy tucks, and liposuction are approximately double those of women 19–34 years of age (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2006a). These surgeries are not medically indicated, can have negative medical side effects, and can even be fatal (Chalker, 2009). Some of these procedures actually reduce sexual sensations and the ability to express emotions, i.e., breast and Botox procedures (Braun, 2010).

The notion of a young and sexy female body has spread to the genitals themselves, as in the recent emergence of "vaginal rejuvenation" and a new industry of other female cosmetic genital surgeries, such as labiaplasty (the cutting back of "overly large" labia) which are solely for aesthetics, that promise more beautiful, tighter, and more appealing genitals (Braun, 2005, 2010; Tiefer, 2008). Women who have received cosmetic labiaplasty range in age from early teens (requests as young as 10) through to 50s or 60s, with those in their 20s and 30s predominating (cited in Braun, 2010). These surgeries have no established medical indications or regulations and can produce (an underreported) lack of sensation and pain. Risks are also underreported and outcome reports have been problematized as scientifically unsound and conducted more as consumer satisfaction than clinical outcome surveys (Liao et al., 2007, cited in Braun, 2010).

Aging female bodies are not the only ones left out of the category "sexually attractive/desirable woman," which has become more exclusionary, marginalizing, obfuscating or pushing and leaving out large numbers of other women who do not look young, supple, girlish or White and heterosexual (i.e., elderly (Loe, 2004), fat (Levy, 2005), disabled (Gill, 2008; Rousso, 1994), lesbian (Hill & Fischer, 2008), women of color (Gill, 2008; Ward, 2004)). Very particular young, thin and highly sexualized celebrity African-American and Latina women pepper the cultural visual landscape (Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Ward, Hansbrough & Walker, 2005). However, these primarily young, thin and light-skinned women's bodies do not represent the bodies of most African-American and Latina women (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 2002). Several analyses have suggested that being excluded from the category "object of male sexual desire" in society, including being older, larger, darker, disabled or not fitting into bodily conventions of sexy or attractive, could be a "protective" factor for those women (Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Tolman, 2002), but the denial of this aspect of one's humanity, including for those who derive esteem or pleasure from being admired, could have other negative consequences.

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Impact on Women's Sexual Relationships and Sexual Functioning

Sexualization can induce negative feelings in girls about their bodies in adolescence, which ultimately may lead to sexual problems in adulthood (Graham, Saunders, Milhausen & McBride, 2004; Wiederman, 2000). Some studies indicate that women with high body dissatisfaction engage in less sexual activity and are especially apprehensive about sexual situations in which their bodies can be seen; conversely, women who feel more positively about and comfortable with their bodies are more comfortable with their own sexual feelings (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke & Peterson, 2000; Trapnell, Meston & Gorzalka, 1997; Wiederman, 2000). Women who report more body dissatisfaction report a later onset of masturbation (Wiederman & Pryor, 1997) and are less likely to receive (but not to perform) oral sex (Wiederman & Hurst, 1998). Schooler, Ward, Merriwether & Caruthers (2005) found that greater levels of body discomfort and body self-consciousness each predicted lower levels of sexual assertiveness, sexual experience, and condom use self-efficacy, as well as higher levels of sexual risk-taking. When self-objectification was experimentally induced in one study, women reported decreased interest in the physical aspects of sex (Roberts & Gettman, 2004). Cosmetic surgeries for "vaginal rejuvenation" may be contributing to physiological sexual problems (Braun, 2010; Tiefer, 2008).

Such findings demonstrate that the interplay between being sexualized as girls and socialized into sexual objects may inhibit women's ability to advocate for, or even acknowledge, their own sexual feelings or pleasure in adulthood. A woman who has been socialized to separate from her experiences of sexual arousal and desire may find it difficult to be aware of her desires, assert her desires, or feel entitled to satisfaction in sexual situations (Brotto, Heiman & Tolman, 2009). Empirical evidence that young women do opt to let events unfold based on their (male) partner's wants and interests supports these concerns (Cotton et al., 2004; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007). The historical hypersexualization of African-American girls and women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992), recently

intensified in the media (Ward, Hansbrough & Walker, 2005), results in African-American young women not feeling entitled to protection from STIs and pregnancy or to sexual pleasure (Burson, 1998; Belgrave, Van Oss Marin & Chambers, 2000).

There is recent evidence that sexual objectification has negative impacts on women's sexual functioning. Sanchez & Kiefer (2007) found that body shame in women was more strongly linked to greater sexual problems than in men, including lower sexual arousability, ability to reach orgasm and having less pleasure from physical intimacy, which was mediated by sexual self-consciousness, regardless of relationship status or age. Donaghue (2009) found negative implications of body dissatisfaction for women's sexual self-schemas. Yamamiya, Cash & Thompson (2006) found that women feeling bad their bodies during sex with a partner was associated with lower sexual self-efficacy, more ambivalence in sexual decision-making and more emotional disengagement. Another study found that self-objectification was related to self-consciousness during sexual activity and decreased sexual functioning via body shame and appearance anxiety for women, with women in an exclusive relationship reporting relatively less self-consciousness during sexual activity (Steer & Tiggemann, 2008; see also Sanchez & Broccoli, 2008). Focusing attention during sexual encounters on how one looks rather than how one feels can see also lead to diminished sexual pleasure (Wiederman, 2000, 2001).

"Moving Targets:" Exploitation of the Impact on Women's Sexuality

The sexualization of girls and the ensuing "youthified" sexual objectification of women has worked its way into the multi-billion dollar fitness industry for women by subtly co-opting sexualizing activities, preying on women's latest anxieties about being sexually attractive or "good enough" sexual objects and on women's disconnection from their bodies as a way to sell. By using the language of "empowerment" while obfuscating yet exploiting its sexualizing associations, this fitness fad is exemplified by the promotion of strip tease as exercise and performing fitness activities in stiletto heels,

and the immense popularity of pole dancing as a route to fitness (i.e., Pilates "on the pole" (Dunn-Camp, 2007)).

In an interview study in which Whitehead & Kurz (2009) identified ways that young women make sense of pole dancing, they found that embracing it as "fun" fitness activity was predicated on distancing the activity from its associations with unwanted or "dirty" sexual objectification and from women who pole dance to make money as sexual objects for male customers. In another interview study, researchers found that women engaging in bodily movement that has sexual connotations outside of a sexual context enabled them to feel "in control" and to enjoy their bodily movements in the context of a fitness class (Melamed, under review). However, their participation in a practice of sexual objectification, divorced from women's sexual feelings or pleasure, is premised on their explicit denial of the origins of the practice in sex work. If women must distance themselves from the "dirty" associations they describe about "real" pole dancing, then why pole dance for fitness rather than engage in other bodily practices as a source of personal power? The women said that they felt what their instructors promised, empowered, "amazing" and youthful but only by desexualizing and not experiencing this practice as sexual. The elephant in the room is the pole itself.

Pole dancing as a physical fitness activity underscores and reifies how *looking* youthfully sexy trumps *feeling* sexy or even sexual, while ironically taking advantage of the disconnection which so many women experience from their bodies in the wake of their sexual socialization and the sexualization of girls. If pole dancing were a route to sexual empowerment for women themselves, shouldn't there be directions for how to use the pole for women's own sexual pleasure?

Impact on Young Women: Sexual Objectification as Sexual Empowerment?

One current public discussion that has been linked to the sexualization of girls is that it could be a positive reflection of a new acceptance of young women's sexuality: that young women and society have

transcended the sexual double standard that denies active female sexuality (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009a, 2009b). Indeed, in recent and frequent depictions of young women, their sexuality is everywhere. In advertisements, in movies, on television (network as well as cable and especially in the guise of "reality" TV), they appear to flaunt their bodies by choice to show off their unabashed sexuality; coy flirtation has given way to in-your-face sexy. Young women voluntarily shaking booty and flashing waxed privates, laughing along with the admiring male crowds captured on reality programs, such as the wildly successful franchise *Girls Gone Wild*, could be interpreted as a new day dawning for young women's sexuality. It has been asserted that women's sexual agency—sexual assertiveness, taking the initiative, shedding a demure seductive look for portrayals of sexual voraciousness more reminiscent of their male counterparts than their female foremothers, say and know what they want as much as the next guy—is the new expected norm for young women and that it is synonymous with sexual empowerment (Gill, 2008; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009a, 2009b). In this final section, I will review the relevant literature and provide a critical lens for approaching this question.

Recent Research: Complicating Pictures of Empowerment with the Objectification of Women's Sexual Agency

The most recent research suggests that young women continue to be negatively affected by sexualized portrayals of young, lithe women, in particular leading them not to feelings of sexual empowerment but to more constrained and stereotypical notions about gender roles and sexual roles, i.e., that women are sexual objects (Ward, 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). Ward & Averitt (2005) reported that heavier reading of popular men's magazines and stronger identification with popular male TV characters was associated with undergraduate (male and female) virgins' expectation that their first experience with sexual intercourse would be more negative. Among undergraduate women, more frequent viewing of reality dating television programs was correlated with

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greater acceptance of a sexual double standard and the belief that dating is a game and that men and women are adversaries (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006; see also Ward, 2002). Roberts & Gettman (2004) found that after exposure to objectifying words found on magazine covers, young women expressed reduced interest in sexual relationships. Young women have been found to have ambivalent and contradictory responses to viewing pornography, for instance disliking it but finding it sexually arousing (Ciclitera, 2004).

Even given this evidence that the sexual double standard still "operates" to organize young women's sexuality, the power and ubiquity of a sense that young women are now unabashed and unadulterated in their sexual aggression requires attention. I suggest that it has become more difficult than ever to analyze these questions *as young women's sexual agency itself has been objectified*. That is, rather than sexual agency being anchored in women knowing what they feel and acting on it, it is now the latest command performance: to appear to have sexual agency. This phenomenon has occurred at the same time in images of sexy and sexual young women and in young women's engagement with their own sexuality. This perspective is supported by the work of communications researchers who have identified how new images of women's sexual agency are used in advertising (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009). While such research does not investigate the impact of media, it does provide avenues for reading "between the lines" of the proliferation of images of sexy, assertive young women.

These researchers observe how fashion, consumerism, bodily pleasure, and sexuality are talked about and portrayed in order to crystallize women into a new market by proffering "new" female sexualities (which are in fact a commodification of old sexualities (Attwood, 2005a, 2006; Harris, 2004; see also McRobbie, 2009)). Farvid & Braun (2006), in a content analysis of portrayals of male and female sexuality in *Cosmopolitan* (US) and *Cleo* (UK) magazines, observed pervasive contradictory messages directed towards young women (be sexually confident but don't speak your mind directly, be "subtle" about

sexual communication to get him to pleasure you without bruising his ego), yielding what they call "pseudo liberation and sexual empowerment" (p. 306). Gill (2008) has noted that the "girl" version of sexual empowerment includes being "hot" constituted by a narrow set of bodily and comportment characteristics and is not accompanied by young women's (or television producer's) demands that men bare it all for women to enjoy. These researchers ask whether these portrayals and how young people are making sense of them constitute a parody of female sexual power rather than its expression.

McRobbie (2009) notes that what she calls the performance of being a sexy and assertive young woman must be tempered with a kind of soft femininity that precludes masculine sexual aggression in order for it to be of interest. Alternatively, Gill (2009) suggests that white, heterosexual women have shifted from sexual objectification to "sexual subjectification," that is, rather than being shown as passive objects of desire, these young women (and only these young women) are portrayed as being active "subjects" of their own sexuality. However, rather than being "liberating," such portraits may constitute a new set of limiting mandates about how young women should express or appear to express their sexuality that is anchored in the "midriff bearing," actively desiring young woman, requiring a toned but not too strong body that looks youthful but should not be too physically capable. To support this analysis, she shows how another new image of female sexuality evident in advertising, the "hot lesbian," is completely disconnected from lesbian sexuality itself and being used to sell products not to lesbians but to men. These media analysts argue that these new depictions of gender relations visually posit that the solution to male bad behavior is for women to be badder; portrayals of the desirable, desiring young women to always be "up for it" reflects how advertisers have recuperated and commodified a kind of feminist consciousness and offered it back to women sanitized of its political critique of gender relations, male sexual violence against women and heteronormativity (Gill, 2008, 2009; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009).

Young Women's Sexual Empowerment?: Choice, Contradiction and the Absence of Embodied Sexual Desire

While images are one significant arena where ideas about young women's sexuality circulate, the contested question on the table is whether or how young women have taken up being sexual objects as an "ironic" new form of sexual agency. Given that in the not-too-distant past, being sexually assertive and being positioned as a sexual object were to be avoided at all costs, it seems remarkable that such a profound 180-degree turnaround of female sexuality has occurred. However, new media cycles and the speed with which new images, forms and performances sweep through social networks may make such quick transformations possible in ways that are unprecedented. Are women being acknowledged and not suffering consequences for being sexual on their own terms, agents of their own sexuality, if you will, empowered to be sexually assertive or to pursue their own sexual feelings on their own behalf?

One simple assertion is that it is what it seems— young women voluntarily stripping for crowds and the camera, even masturbating on camera, having fun like and with the guys by being sexual free agents, is unequivocal evidence of sexual empowerment—the power to choose to engage in any sexual action. Another simple analysis is that young women have been sold and bought a bill of goods that what they want is to be as raunchy as guys and the "girl version" is to make the choice to be fantastic (literally, to bring heterosexual male sexual fantasies to life) and that they are being duped into believing they have achieved sexual freedom. A third way to evaluate this conundrum is anchored in a set of psychological questions about young women's experience of this ostensible sexual empowerment. These psychological questions are about the place of dissociation and embodied desire—sexual and emotional—in sexual empowerment. By dissociation, I mean a literal disconnection from one's feelings, both emotional and physical. Embodied sexual desire is the experience of sexual feelings, passions, desire and arousal in one's own body; that is, desire not only as what

one wants at an intellectual or cognitive level but as bodily experience.

While there is virtually no peer-reviewed research to date that enables an evaluation of these interpretations, there is one very rich and thorough source that enables investigation of these three interpretations. Ariel Levy has named the infusion of highly sexualized media into the mainstream "raunch culture" (Levy, 2005), an outcome of the pornification of culture that has already been discussed. Her journalistic investigations provide an account of how this culture gained ascendancy, who produces it, what roles young women are playing in it, and what young women say about their experiences participating in it. She offers some pointed analyses that go beneath the surface of portrayals and actual performances of young women's sexuality that reveal the only sexual agency we know, male sexual agency. In trying to make sense of "raunch culture," Levy discovered a kind of double-speak in the uncritical embrace of sexual object turned sexual actor status by these young women. She and others (Gill, 2009; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009) observe that being a "great sexual object" who also acts like a porn star is a performance rather than the embodiment of a new form of female sexuality, which in the past has been desired but condemned but that now accrues attention, popularity and new versions of old experiences of power—the power to turn men on, the power to tease men who are bursting at the seams at the sight of their sexual fantasies come to life, and the power to accept or reject them.

Specifically, Levy noted widespread absence of any discussion of female sexual pleasure (save for the pleasure of feeling power over a "vulnerable" other), a consistent lack of or explicit denial of feeling sexual, rather, only enjoyment of being perceived as sexy, the pervasiveness of alcohol in all of the settings she observed (including the production of "reality" TV), and the still-present and even eroticized threat and reality of male sexual violence that makes it all more exciting unless it happens. Young women did not describe their wanting or demanding what felt good or right to them sexually, as the new sexual empowerment

is about doing, adopting a quest that, with agency and is admired as embodying was ultimately undesired or seemingly is complementary men are (maybe disconnected) women.

Levy identifies multiple sexual expressions even for men under inequality obscures that in place acting on or Farvid & Bra are invisibly ing at a very is not on the those choices control is en which creates becomes cult 2004). That is ited to what's choices are a have as sexu that is not vi Corsianos (2 of what look stream porno on sexual ch

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is about doing—performing—rather than feeling, adopting a girl version of sexuality as conquest that, when queried, seems less about sexual agency and more to do with other rewards—being admired as fantastic sexual objects to the point of embodying the pornographic, which Levy found was ultimately embarrassing, humiliating or the undesired endpoint of sexual experiences. This seemingly limited and disembodied sexuality is complemented and intensified by how young men are (more than ever) sexually socialized to be disconnected consumers of these very young women.

Levy identifies the paucity of choice and missing multiplicity of ideas about what sexuality and sexual expression are or might be—for women and even for men if unencumbered by persistent gender inequality—and how the current landscape obscures that limit while at the same time holding it in place. It is difficult to evaluate claims of acting on or acting out sexual choices when, as Farvid & Braun (2006) note, these sexual choices are invisibly limited. That is, women are partaking at a very sparse buffet without a sense of what is not on the menu or their right or wish to want those choices. As Braun (2010) observes, “if social control is enacted through advertising and media, which creates the guise of free choice . . . free choice becomes culturally circumscribed” (see also Harris, 2004). That is, more than ever, “free choice” is limited to what’s on sale, but the ways in which these choices are a subset of the range of choices women have as sexual beings are in fact regulatory—and that is not visible to the naked or untrained eye. Corsianos (2007) contends that the production of what looks like choice in the content of mainstream pornography contributes to the constraint on sexual choice itself.

Levy concludes “we are afraid of real female power . . . to figure out what we internally want from sex instead of mimicking whatever popular culture holds up to us as sexy” (pp. 199–200). In the wide range of anecdotal accounts she collected, the theme of young women going for sexy looks and acting sexy while at the same time expressing discomfort or lack of interest in being sexual (thinking about the way they are experienced

rather than what they are experiencing) reflects the strong hold that sexual objectification has over what might constitute one’s sexuality. In her interviews, young women narrated their embrace of “the male sexual gaze” as the only apparent option for sexual agency, conveying “if you can’t beat them, join them” mentality (see Thompson, this volume, for supportive and contradictory views).

This line of thinking suggests the need to *distinguish between embodied sexuality and performances of sexuality that are now portrayed as sexual freedom*. The spectre of disembodiment that echoes in available accounts by young women and analyses of portrayals in advertising and the media raises a red flag about the role of sexual objectification in sexual empowerment. Even orgasm—the one form of women’s sexual pleasure that is acknowledged, albeit itself objectified—appears to be more about doing a good performance than one’s own pleasure, evidenced by one young woman Levy observed after she did a masturbation scene for *Girls Gone Wild*, who was concerned that she had not done it right, because she had taken too long to produce her orgasm.

Teasing apart the complex, contradictory and commercial dimensions of the “new sexual empowerment” and raising challenges about what is missing from it—women’s embodied sexual pleasure as an anchor to sexual subjectivity, real choices that flesh out rather than laminate female sexual agency—within or perhaps missing from the lived experiences of real young women is a vital next step for public discourse, education, and research. With the exception of Levy’s account, research and analysis addressing the question of young women’s sexual empowerment reflect dissections of images rather than real young women’s experiences. The question of how they make sense of “sexual empowerment” remains up for grabs: Is it authentic or what does it mean to have to be (or appear to be) sexual in a new kind of way that fore-fronts appearance but makes irrelevant whether or not a woman’s desire is real or embodied? Investigating younger and older women’s negotiations of embodiment and pressures to disembody may provide a way of navigating questions

about and analyses of sexual empowerment that appear to defy, diffuse, defuse, or obfuscate young women's sexuality under the newest "youthified" regime of pervasive sexual objectification.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed what we know about the consequences of the sexualization of girls and the current youthified forms of sexual objectification of women for boys' and men's and women's sexuality. In some ways, this is a literature that awaits development, and the leads we have currently underscore the urgency for such a research agenda. What may be most problematic and challenging is the way that these representations and, increasingly, enactments of sexual objectification seem more and more to be "normal" in general and what real people's sexuality is supposed to be like. Media literacy campaigns that reveal the commercial interests embedded in the depiction and simultaneous cooptation and commercialization of female sexual agency as the latest product to consume, crave, create and maintain are needed, as is "choice education." Young people deserve the tools to discern and challenge the limited choices that put forth as a sparse menu for sexuality that barely offers any sense of it as part of our humanity and to demand more and better options for how they are represented and how they can be.

For women, boys, and men, sexual objectification as sexuality is continuous with education that fails to teach children and teenagers to differentiate their sexual desires from their desire for attention, to differentiate being sexual from being sexy, and to distinguish sex as consumption from sex as experience. Gill (2009) argues that being for or against sexualization is less useful than breaking it out as a multifaceted not homogeneous process. Sexual rights for girls and women, including rights to pleasure, knowledge and the freedom to enact what one does and does not desire (Tolman & Costa, 2010) is predicated on an understanding of and refusal to embrace the divisions left standing among women and girls predicated on their sexual behavior regardless of what is motivating it.

In all of this stew of sexual objectification and inappropriate sexualization, however, it is important to keep in mind that boys, men, women and

girls themselves are not empty vessels into which images and constructions of girls and women as (only) sexual objects and sexualized body parts are deposited. Media, feminist and psychological theories posit individuals as at least potentially "active agents" in determining how they will make sense of and "consume" what these various cultural contexts provide, underscoring avenues for critique, resistance and change, both individual and social. Not all boys are trolling the Internet for porn, playing video games with interactive options for sexualized violence, nor are all men disengaged from their emotional lives; not all young women are bargaining it all for cameras or want to, and not all women buy into (literally and figuratively) the impossible portrayals that define sexy or deny feeling sexual.

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Note

1. While there is evidence that the sexual objectification and self-objectification of boys' and men's bodies are on the rise, this line of argument is not included in this chapter because it falls outside of its scope. While boys' and men's focus on their appearance may be a subject of increased concern, it is also neither a socially mandated nor a pervasive part of their self-identity on a broad scale (boys and men are without question more than their bodies, albeit male adolescent anxieties can certainly be about their physical development) as is the case with girls and women.

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