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Introduction

The sexualization of a person is defined as being “sexually objectified — that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.” (WomenLeadingChange). Sexualization does not only affect adults but as time goes on children are falling victim to sexualization at younger and younger ages. The way that society views the traditional definitions of how to be a man or woman has been severely altered by mass media’s images of the sexualization of young girls and women, which encourages male sexual violence. Children are being robbed of their childhood and forced down a road in which they have no choice but to become what the media has placed before them. They are being groomed into sexually misinformed, violent and psychologically damaged adults.

Follow the money

There are many mass media related industries benefit from sexualizing girls and promoting rape culture. In doing this, these industries are compromising the innocence of children and their psychological and sexual development just to make money as a business. These industries are able to reach children through television, music or music videos and fashion.

The United States television industry earned about 134.7 billion dollars from 2005 to 2014 (US Census Bureau). With the average person watching about 299.6 minutes of television per day (ZenithOptimedia; Nielsen), it is easy for all types of messages to be broadcasted to even the youngest of viewers. Some of the first movies girls get to watch as children are the Disney princesses created by Walt Disney. Some of the movies include Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Beauty and the Beast, and The Little Mermaid just to name a few. But, what many parents are shocked to learn is that the Disney princesses are teaching their young girls to self-sexualize. This means that young girls are placing their value as an individual solely on their sex appeal or sexual behavior and how they believe others viewed them. According to an article called “Little girls or little women: The Disney Princess effect” by Stephanie Hanes “the $4 billion Disney Princess empire was the first step down a path to scarier challenges, from self-objectification to cyberbullying to unhealthy body images” (Hanes 1). The author is saying that the Disney princesses are promoting this negative image of self-objectification that is setting girls down the path to cyberbullying and unhealthy body image as they get older. The article also states that due to the changing times and portrayal of women in television “Girls no longer feel that there is anything they must not do or cannot do because they're female, but they hold increasingly strong beliefs that if you are going to attempt these other things, you need to look and be sexually hot." (Hanes 3). Women have broken into so many different fields that were previously dominated by men, but despite this young girls still feel that if they do choose to be involved in different things they must look sexy while doing so.

Hanes also cites many different studies and opinions of parents and professionals in her article including that of Professor Diane Levin. Levin is an early childhood specialist and co-writer of the book “Sexy too Soon”, she states in Hanes’ article “Marketers are motivated to use the sexualization of women to attract little girls, or violence to attract little boys, because developmentally children are drawn to things they don't understand, or find unnerving” (Hanes 5). Levin implies that the marketing industry is encouraged to use television’s ability to reach children to promote the sexualization of women and girls. They also exploit the natural curiosity of children to draw them in, trapping young girls in the idea that they must aspire to be sex objects and encouraging young boys to emulate the violence they see. The things that young children are seeing in movies and on television are shaping their views, actions and how they value themselves in society.

In June 2014, the digital music streaming revenue was predicted to grow by 13.7 percent annually, while annual digital music downloading revenue increased by 3.3 percent going into 2018 (IFPI). All of this expected growth in the music industry can be attributed to consumers streaming and downloading more music as time progresses. Consumers are not only streaming more music for the popularity of the songs from their favorite artists, but they are also interested in seeing the music videos attached to these songs. Artists seem to be singing, rapping and doing more outrageous and explicit things in their music and overall image to grab and hold on to their fans’ attention. Ann Oldenburg and Arienne Thompson wrote an article called “Sex sells: Has showbiz pressure gone too far?” in which they discussed this issue and how it relates to young girls being persuaded to use their sexuality as a product they can sell. In the article, the authors’ quoted Charlotte Church, a British singer who stated that “young pop stars today are encouraged to present themselves as hypersexualized, unrealistic, cartoonish objects, reducing female sexuality to a prize you can win.” (Oldenburg and Thompson 2). Church is commenting on the fact that popstars are being pressured into portraying themselves unrealistic sex objects to gain attention and stay relevant to their fans. As a result, the fans who look at these musical artists as their role models are emulating the things they are seeing and hearing reducing their overall idea of female sexuality to a prize to compete for. Oldenburg and Thompson also consult the opinion of Rebecca Collins, a member of the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Collins states “what we see as sexy are things that really are about the buying and selling of sex, instead of what sex is really all about, which can be very healthy and a wonderful thing. We shouldn't try to eliminate it from life, it's just that we shouldn't think of it as something to be bought and sold." (Oldenburg and Thompson 3). Collins is saying that the music industry is gaining profit off promoting this idea that sex is an item that people buy and sell. In doing this, the music industry is denying the fans (especially the younger audience) a chance to learn the truth about sex which is that it’s actually a natural part of development. Collins argues that sex shouldn’t be exiled from life, but we shouldn’t be treating it as the next hot commodity.

The fashion industry is one of the leading businesses in the United States. In 2014, the estimated sales of clothing and clothing accessories in the U.S was about 786 dollars per capita (US Census Bureau). But, the fashion industry has also played a part in sexualizing young girls using common toys or dolls to promote the idea of gaining popularity and attention by wearing revealing clothes. In an article, by Mark Sommer called “Are the season’s hottest dolls selling sexual stereotypes” the author argues that doll companies like Barbie and Bratz are selling sexual stereotypes to young girls through the image and clothing used in creating these dolls. Sommer states in the article “Many parents are disturbed at how sexualized dolls like Bratz, as well as similar images in the media, are aimed directly at little girls. It speeds up childhood, they warn, and reinforces stereotypes of girls as sexual objects, "bad girls" and boy-obsessed shoppers” (Sommer 1). The quote is commenting on the fact that the Bratz doll company is targeting little girls for sales. Sommer argues that the dolls they’re producing are negatively affecting young girls reinforcing the “bad girl” and “boy obsessed shopper” stereotype. In his article, Sommer goes on to quote Sharon Lamb, co-author of "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes." Lamb states that “Girls are being bombarded with messages about how to be a cute, hot shopping diva from about age 3 and up” (Sommer 2). This is forcing young girls to grow up too fast and as a result, they are losing out on enjoying their childhood.

Follow the exploitation

The girls of today seem to be constantly overwhelmed with the different images and messages influencing their lives. In an article, by Rachel Bell called “Sexualization of Girls Teaches Boys to Be Sexually Violent” she argues that “The saturation of sexualized images of females is leading to body hatred, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression, high rates of teen pregnancy and unhealthy sexual development in our girl children. It also leads to impaired cognitive performance" (Bell 1). Bell is saying that these images are harming girls both physically and psychologically, the stress of trying to achieve the things the media puts forward is leading them down an unhealthy path. Bell also goes on to speak about how boys and young men are also affected by the sexualization of girls. She states that “Boys who are not enthusiastic about it, or speak out against it, run the risk of being ignored or ridiculed, of being labelled "gay", "unmanly", or not liking sex” (Bell 2). It seems that boys and young men have this idea that in order to prove their masculinity they must express dominance over women and young girls. The quote is commenting on the fact that when boys and young men speak out against the behavior of their peers they risk being isolated and negatively labelled as a result.

Bell’s final argument is that “The sexualization of girls is not just shattering the lives of girls and women, it is preventing boys and young men from relating to girls and women as complex human beings with so much to offer them. It is preventing boys from forming healthy friendships and working relationships with girls and women. Instead, it is nurturing potentially violent abusers, rapists and johns [clients of prostitutes]. Ultimately, it means boys are not free to be themselves, to know their own humanity” (Bell 3). The quote is saying that this issue is on-going and affects both young men and women later in their lives. Women become valued as nothing more than sex objects and men are nurtured into being sexually violent against women. The relationship between men and women has become transactional, solely about what each of the sexes can get out of it (D'Agostino 1). This means that men and women are not really connecting anymore, they do not view each other as complex human beings with much to offer each other in a relationship.

Solution:

There are many different ways to approach this issue starting with the different areas of mass media discussed earlier in this essay television, music and fashion. In television, parents should use the parental controls on the TV to block certain channels that promote sexual stereotypes. Parents need to boycott these channels because networks can only gain profit if viewers continue to watch the shows, and when shows lack viewers they get cancelled. Also, they need to constantly comment and speak out against these networks to regulate the amount of sexual content in their shows. Young girls need to see shows, movies and images that showcase successful women from all walks of life to understand that they can do whatever they want as females without focusing on beauty and sexuality. In music, artists need to use their talents to create positive, appropriate and socially conscious music and videos that educate their fans about real issues instead of promoting an unrealistic lifestyle. They need to take on the responsibility of being good role models for young men and women so they have an opportunity to learn how to be productive adults. Also, young men and women themselves need to draw a line to decide when certain music is offensive and contains too much sexual content. They should leave negative comments, use their social media accounts as platforms to speak out against the degrading messages being promoted or chose not to watch the videos or listen to music all together. In fashion, parents, young men and women should protest against the image of young girls being dressed in revealing clothing as the only option to be considered beautiful. In order to protest this idea women should participate in slutwalks. Slutwalks are protests that call for the end of rape culture in which, women wear different types of clothing with the goal of teaching the public that a woman does not deserve to be sexually assaulted or harassed because of what she wears. It needs to be expressed that women come in all shapes and sizes and women and girls have the option to but don’t need to be dressed a certain way to be consider sexy or beautiful.

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