3/28/16

ENG 1710

Simone Haylett

Issue Paper (revised copy)

Due Date: 4/4/16

The Sexualization of Girls in Media

**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.” (Women Leading Change 1) Sexualization does not only affect adults but as time goes on children are falling victim to sexualization at younger and younger ages. In the past, women were looked at by society as pure by their virtue and chastity, today the sexualized images circulated by mass media turns young girls and women into sex objects and encourages young boys and men to be sexually violent. 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. This essay will explore the sexualization of girls over various types of media and its effects on their sexual development from childhood to adulthood.

**Follow the money**

Rape culture is defined as a societal way of life that advocates and normalizes rape and sexual violence against a person. There are many mass media related industries that 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. These 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 view 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). Hanes is saying that the Disney princesses are promoting a negative image of self-objectification that will lead young girls to a future of cyberbullying and unhealthy body image. The article also states that due to the 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) In the recent years, women have broken into so many different fields that were previously dominated by men, but despite this young girls are still holding on to this idea that they should be perceived as “sexually hot” while participating in certain things. These “other things” that Hanes mentions in the quote can be anything, including the effort girls should be putting into areas such as education, extra-curricular activities like sports and clubs, or pursuing professions in areas that lack female presence such as law enforcement, emergency services or construction. By focusing so much of their energy and time into being “sexy” girls are taking away their education, after-school activities and potential career paths for the future.

In the introduction of a book called “So Sexy So Soon” written by early childhood specialist, Diane Levin Ph.D. and Jean Kilbourne Ed.D. the text states “many industries make an obscene amount of money using sex and violence to market their products to children. Whatever their race, ethnic group, economic status, or gender, and whether they can afford to buy a lot or very few of these products, children are deeply affected.” (Levin and Kilbourne 2) Levin and Kilbourne are saying that through marketing their products using sex and violence over different mediums industries are making huge amounts of money off children. The authors’ also go on to say that the marketing business doesn’t discriminate no matter the race, ethnic group, economic status or whether these children can afford to buy a certain amount of product, the children are still affected. For girls they will be trapped in the idea that they must aspire to be sex objects and young boys will learn 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.

Music is an area of industry that is dependent on the creative and expressive talents of the artists involved. It is through their talent and the efforts of their fans that the music industry continues to grow and thrive throughout the years. One of the strategies that keeps the music industry growing is encouraging the constant downloading and streaming of music online. 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 “Selling sex: 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 as unrealistic sex objects to gain attention and stay relevant to their fans. The concept of a female music artist’s image is to be the girl that every boy wants and every girl wants to be, either way they must encourage “want”, making their fans have to be in constant competition to gain as much popularity and attention from their peers as their favorite artist. As a result of this their fans 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 like a 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 unfortunately, 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 writes “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 3). This is forcing young girls to grow up too fast and as a result, they are losing out on enjoying their childhood.

It is no secret that girls are being completely overwhelmed with images and messages from all types of media at every turn in their lives. There is no way to hide or shield these little girls from this, the only thing that can be offered is guidance to recognize and understand it. Ultimately, future generations of girls will face more difficult challenges than those revealed to the public currently, but the more the media continues to desensitize people and normalize these messages and images, the more society accepts rape culture.

**Follow the exploitation**

The sexualization of girls goes farther than just what people see on a tv screen, hear in a song or the clothes worn by dolls from the store. These things are the just the start to a new challenge, the exploitation of girls. 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 them.

**Solution**

There are many different ways to approach the sexualization of girls in media, starting with exploring the different images and messages conveyed through 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. Finally, parents need to work on finding different alternatives for their young children. Movies and tv shows that are educational and inspire positive attitudes and life lessons are the things girls and boys need for healthy development during their childhood. 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. Parents should also change their dialog towards their children, making sure that their comments about their child’s appearance aren’t too harsh or offensive. Overall, young girls and women need to be presented with options that accommodate them no matter what they want to look or feel like. It needs to be openly expressed and acknowledged that women come in all shapes and sizes and women and should all be considered beautiful.

In conclusion, the sexualization of girls over various types of media is an issue that affects both girls and boys. Regardless of what children may understand from these mixed messages one thing is clear, sexualization is stealing childhood away from young boys and girls. The media is trying to force children to physically mature faster than their minds are ready for, and without the proper guidance and life experiences their minds may never truly catch up. They will grow into confused adults forever chasing after a fantasy, girls wanting to be the ideal “object” and men wanting to control them. Neither will ever be able to acknowledge the genuine nature of the other without the constant pressure of media constraints, and future generations will suffer.

**Works Cited**

* ZenithOptimedia. "Daily Time Spent Watching Tv per Capita in The United States from 2010 to 2017 (in Minutes)." Statista - The Statistics Portal. Statista. June 2015. Web. 29 Mar 2016.
* US Census Bureau. "Estimated Revenue of The U.S. Broadcasting Industry from 2005 to 2014 (in Billion U.S. Dollars)." Statista - The Statistics Portal. Statista. January 2016. Web. 29 Mar 2016.
* US Census Bureau. "U.S. Clothing per Capita Sales, 2014 | Statistic."Statista. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
* "The Sexualisation of Women and Girls." *Women Leading Change*. N.p., 13 Mar. 2014. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
* Hanes, Stephanie. "Little Girls or Little Women? The Disney Princess Effect."*The Christian Science Monitor*. The Christian Science Monitor, 24 Sept. 2011. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
* Oldenburg, Ann. "Selling Sex: Has Showbiz Pressure Gone Too Far?"*USA Today* 25 Oct. 2013: 01A. *General OneFile*. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
* Sommer, Mark. "Are the Season's Hottest Dolls Selling Sexual Stereotypes? - The Buffalo News." *Www.buffaloNews.com*. N.p., 16 Dec. 2007. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
* Bell, Rachel. "Sexualization of Girls Teaches Boys to Be Sexually Violent." *Is Childhood Becoming Too Sexualized*. Ed. Olivia Ferguson and Hayley Mitchell Haugen. Detroit: Greenhaven, 2010. At Issue. Rpt. of "Our Sexual Obsession Damages Boys as Well as Girls." *Independent* 15 July 2008: n. pag. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Web. 31 Mar. 2016.
* Levin, Diane E., and Jean Kilbourne. *So Sexy So Soon* (n.d.): n. pag. Web. 5 May 2016.