Sexualization in the Media and

Its Effects on the Behavior of American Teenagers

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American teenagers growing up in the twenty-first century are constantly being bombarded with media images and messages linked to a long-held ideology—the notion that boys will be boys and girls will be girls, and that these social norms should be accepted and internalized. The sexualization of young men and women in media sources such as television and magazines is a process by which they are exposed to various sexual scripts that control their attitudes, behaviors, interactions and experiences. This sexualization has developed into a sociocultural phenomenon known as "raunch culture," in which stereotypical gender and sexual roles are supported and maintained through the objectification of women and the perpetuation of male dominance. As a result, teenagers aim to develop their social and sexual identities in ways that reflect these supposed norms, endangering their sexual health, mental wellbeing and overall cognitive functioning. In order to preserve the American youth, educational, family and media institutions must work together to salvage the remains of adolescent innocence and personal identity.

Self-Esteem, Sexual Scripts and Media Influence

Adolescent males and females develop self-esteem in relation to intersecting factors, including media influence, body image and emotional expression. A research study examining 93 males and 116 females in the fifth, eighth and twelfth grades found that females reported having lower self-esteem than males in early adolescence, and that older adolescent males reported having lower self-esteem and being less emotionally expressive than younger males. While the researchers found that the "acceptance of media messages … about the importance of physical appearance [was] negatively related to general feelings about the self" for both sexes (in

all groups other than early adolescent males), the females reported having lower self-esteem in

relation to media messages about body image than did males in late childhood and early

adolescence (Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliewer, & Kilmartin, 2001, p. 239). This suggests that young

adolescent females and older adolescent males are the groups most likely to be influenced

negatively by media messages, and that females are more concerned with body image than males

are. Perhaps this is a result of the extreme sexualization of females accepted in both the media

and society.

        Sexualization takes place when a person's sexual, rather than individual, characteristics

or traits are emphasized. This happens when a person's value is assessed mainly on the basis of

his or her sexual attributes, when appeal and attractiveness are defined in terms of sexiness,

when a person is viewed as a sex object rather than as an individual or when sexuality is forced

upon an individual (American Psychological Association, 2010). This process detracts from

aspects of individual personality and self-expression, reducing its victims merely to their sexual

identities by devaluing their other skills and accomplishments.

        In a society where sexualization is common, people often develop their sexual beliefs,

roles and identities in accordance with the scripts that dictate what attitudes and behaviors are

normal and acceptable, as well as what consequences will ensue when those standards are defied.

These scripts, although they may provide temporary relief to the inexperienced, often lead people

to conform to standards that are unrealistic, undesired or both.

        The message is often perpetuated among teenagers that sexual encounters should be

spontaneous, and that taking health precautions such as using protection will detract from the

romance and the heat of the moment. Research on the media consumption and sexual health

behaviors of more than 5,000 middle school students shows that messages about sexual health in

television, magazines, music and movies that appeal to black and white teenagers are often

nonexistent or erroneous, and reaffirm stereotypical beliefs that males are responsible for

initiating sex and are obsessed with sexual performance, while females are responsible for

providing and using protection. Findings also show that these media sources stigmatize the use

of contraception (Hunt, Brown, & L'Engle, 2008). If teenagers are exposed to media that

associate talking about and using protection with feelings of shame and embarrassment, they will

be more likely to view contraception in a negative light and less likely to think seriously about

using protection and being conscious about their sexual health. This hinders communication

between sexual partners and puts them at risk for unwanted pregnancy and the contraction of

sexually transmitted infections.

Adolescents learn scripts and interpret their messages on both interactional and societal

levels, and then internalize them on an individual level. A meta-analysis of "psychological

theory, research and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other

cultural messages" found that the impact of the sexualization of adolescents could be explained

through the lenses of multiple psychological theories. Socialization theories—social learning,

cognitive developmental and gender schema—say that culturally appropriate behaviors and

gender norms are learned through modeling, reward and reinforcement. Sociocultural theories—

cultivation, agenda setting and framing, feminist psychodynamic and social construction—

analyze the importance of the culture or context in which gender development takes place,

highlighting people's readiness to accept mediated messages about the world, and the structure

of those messages to focus on certain issues and maintain power through gender relations.

Cognitive theories suggest that scripts for sexualization and objectification may be unconscious

and automatic. Psychoanalytic theories point to "parental seduction" as a stimulus for self-

sexualization and a disregard for healthy sexuality. Finally, the objectification theory combines each of the other theories, looking at how many adolescent girls internalize and reproduce the scripts through "self-objectification," assessing their bodies from third-person points of view to make sure they fit the cultural standards, thus valuing themselves in terms of sexual attributes and contributing to the cycle (American Psychological Association, 2010). These cultural standards are created, spread and maintained through popular media sources such as television and magazines.

Television

Television programming aimed at a target audience of teenagers often sets high sexual standards that are nearly impossible for adolescent males and females to live up to. Teenage programs write cultural norms about the loss of virginity and leave teenagers feeling inadequate for not being able to replicate the sexual experiences they see on television. This leads to a decrease in self-esteem for both sexes, especially for females who become self-conscious about body image after viewing the programs.

Research has found that television programming contributes to the social construction of the multiple meanings of virginity, including three different sexual scripts: the abstinence script, the urgency script and the management script. The abstinence script defines virginity as a valued gift and emphasizes the delay of its loss, sometimes until marriage. The urgency script defines virginity as a shameful burden and emphasizes the need for its loss in order to maintain positive social status and declare gender identity. The management script neither supports abstinence nor urgency as the norm, but defines virginity loss as inevitable and focuses on methods of coping with the physical, social and emotional risks associated with it by promoting contraception and "appropriate" virginity loss over "inappropriate" virginity loss (Kelly, 2010).

In an analysis of 10 hour-long primetime television "teen drama" shows, 12 out of 44 teenage main characters lost their virginity in seasons that aired between 2003 and 2005. Virginity loss fell under the abstinence script on *7th Heaven* and *One Tree Hill*, the management script on *Everwood*, *Gilmore Girls*, *The O.C.* and *Summerland* and the urgency script on *Life as We Know It* and *The O.C.* Although the majority of the sexual encounters shown were not of high risk to the main characters' physical health and showed teenagers taking control of their sexuality, many were not representative of sexual health. Some of the episodes showed characters engaging in sexual activity in fear of losing a boyfriend and perpetuated the themes that all normal males are obsessed with sex and that sex is a shameful act. Absent factors include an exploration of female sexual desire and a representation of racial, ethnic and sexual minority characters (Kelly, 2010). The result is a televised representation of sexual experiences that revolve around relationships between white, middle-class, and heterosexual teenagers, limiting the resources of those who do not fit those descriptions.

Sexual initiation is now occurring among American teenagers at increasingly earlier ages than in the past, a result positively correlated with their exposure to sexual content on television. Teenagers exposed repeatedly to this sexual content are more likely to engage in sexual activity than those who are not. In a sample of adolescents aged 12-17, 61% of females and 39% of males regretted that they did not wait longer to have sex for the first time. For males, but not females, the exposure to sexual content on television was positively correlated with the likelihood of regret. Television programs glamorize and romanticize sex in unrealistic ways, thus leading teenagers to set high expectations that their first sexual experiences simply cannot meet. Males may be dissatisfied with their first sexual performances after hoping to live up to the televised masculine portrayals they see. The reason that exposure to sexual content on television

has no correlation to the likelihood of regret among female respondents is most likely because

"female television characters are more often shown to experience negative sexual consequences

than are male characters," which may lead them to set lower expectations than males for an

idealistic experience (Martino, Collins, Elliot, Kanouse, & Berry, 2009, p. 98).

Overall, television programs tend to portray teenage sexual behavior in terms of a need to

prolong, expedite or control virginity loss—as a task rather than a pleasurable experience;

support stereotypical gender roles and sexual roles that describe males as seeking sex and

females as pleasing males; attach a stigma to sex, sending mixed messages; fail to accurately

represent diversity in sexual experiences; expose teenagers to content that encourages them to

have sex at early ages; and leads males to set high expectations for virginity loss that results in

regret.

Magazines

Magazine content is another medium that influences the sexual attitudes and behaviors of

teenagers. While some magazine articles can be a source of knowledge about sexual health, the

majority of content aimed at teenagers perpetuates dominant male sexual stereotypes as the

norm, encouraging teenagers to adhere to the gender and sexual roles they have already been

taught, rather than challenging them. Female magazine covers are also often populated with tips

for pleasing men, both in daily life and during sex, determining the feminine identity in terms of

serving masculinity. Through articles and advertisements featuring tips and products for ways to

dress, accessorize and use make up, females are persuaded to focus on body image and engage in

self-objectification in order to appeal to men. When teenagers realize they cannot live up to the

images and descriptions in the magazines they read, they are at risk for developing low self-

esteem and becoming susceptible to physical and mental conditions such as eating disorders and depression.

A research study that analyzed the media use and sexual attitudes of 205 female college students considered the differences between the influences of adult magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*, and teenage magazines, such as *Seventeen*. Other factors considered included reading levels, reading motivations and femininity ideologies. The results found that women who read the adult magazines were more likely to view sex as fun, less likely to consider it risky or dangerous and more likely to support an assertive female role rather than stereotypical sexual roles. Females who read the teenage magazines, however, were more likely to support the stereotypical sexual roles, specifically the stereotypical male sexual role that says women should be submissive to men, whom they should aim to please. Research also found that women who were motivated to read content which detailed sex and appearance advice were more likely supporters of the submissive female sexual role, while those who were motivated to read content for entertainment purposes were likely the same women who described sex as fun (Kim & Ward, 2004). This suggests that content targeted toward teenagers is more representative of the stereotypical sexual roles, and therefore more constraining in terms of sexual health and identity. Teenage females are restricted to understanding sexual experiences in terms of male desires, rather than their own. Only in adulthood, after they have gained some sexual experience, do females have the social support to transform their beliefs about and attitudes toward sex, allowing them to embrace the assertive female role.

This research builds on an earlier study that evaluated 244 articles pertaining to sexuality and romance in the teenage magazine *Seventeen* between 1974 and 1994. The results found that the scope of sexual scripts and female sexual subjectivity embodied in these articles did expand

over time to "recognize female desire, ambivalence about sexuality, homosexuality, masturbation, oral sex, and even recreational sexual activity," however the dominant and stereotypical sexual roles and scripts were still used in the describing the difficulty of obtaining the relationships necessary to express these factors of sexuality. This is an example of readers being discouraged from challenging the status quo (Carpenter, 1998, p. 158). While *Seventeen* has made clear progress over the past few decades, its editors still have steps to take in order to truly embrace changes in sexual scripts, therefore making it easier for people to perceive these changes as legitimate and attainable. The results of this study show that it is possible to create alternatives to the dominant sexual scripts that restrict females, but that no social change will occur unless the new scripts are regarded as preferable to their predecessors.

Overall, magazines provide teenagers with content that reinforces the stereotypical sexual scripts they have been taught, and generally do not address the possibilities of assertive female roles or the concept of sex as a recreational activity until they reach adulthood. Magazine editors have the potential to change the social perceptions of what sexual beliefs and attitudes remain dominant among teenagers. If they are to take on this responsibility, however, they must not only present alternative options, but must also promote and legitimize them in order to spread them to other mainstream media and make them accessible to teenagers. This could promote the maintenance of higher self-esteem and could help reduce the prevalence of eating disorders and depressive conditions in teenagers.

Since sexualization occurs at individual, interactional and societal levels, an approach to counteract its negative influences on the attitudes and behaviors of teenagers has to occur in multiple stages. There must be an effort in educational, family and media institutions in order to restructure the kind of formal education children and teenagers receive on sex and sexuality, to

analyze and prioritize which beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are modeled in the home, and to control the messages and sexual scripts that teenagers consume from the media—especially on television and in magazines—and subsequently internalize as social norms.

In order to teach teenagers how to filter media messages, schools should require students to take mandatory media literacy courses. Educational institutions should also use athletics to focus female attention on body competence over body image, encourage participation in extracurricular activities and the development of individual talents (which has been suggested to reduce adolescent risk behavior) and develop a comprehensive sexuality education that helps to counteract the incorrect information about and the unrealistic view of sex and sexuality fed to teenagers through the media (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Family members can promote mediation and co-viewing to monitor what their children and teenagers watch, and take advantage of the opportunity to engage in discussion by commenting on portrayals they find particularly inaccurate or restrictive. They can also strengthen and empower teenagers through religion, spirituality and meditation and psychological alternatives to those offered by popular culture. And they can take an active role by assessing what beliefs, attitudes and behaviors they model, as well as by speaking up about sexualized images and messages they encounter (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Certainly, much of the responsibility to promote change falls upon the media industry, which has caused so much of the damage. Media institutions can work to develop age-appropriate, culturally diverse resources that educate adolescents about healthy sexuality and promote such messages in television shows, magazines and other sources of content targeted toward teenagers. They can also use community-based approaches and open forums with media experts to discusses strategies to counteract sexualization in the media and its effects on

teenagers, develop positive messages and rewards for teenagers who promote images and messages of healthy sexuality, and encourage other media institutions and advertisers to do the same (American Psychological Association, 2010).

If ever there was a time for change in the mediated sexualization of teenagers, that time is now. The development of raunch culture seems to be at its peak in American society, and without serious attention paid to the steps that educational, family and media institutions can take to counteract the stereotypical sexual scripts and ideologies that young males and females are internalizing at increasingly earlier ages, those dominant sexual roles may become permanent norms, forever diminishing the significance of the teenage years as a transition between childhood and adulthood.

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