

How does media exposure influence young girls' sexuality?

Monika Sargayoos

Abstract

This literature review highlights the link between media exposure and young girls' sexuality. The review will discuss different views that how girls' sexuality can and cannot be influenced by western values circulated within the western media. I will argue that even though media play a critical role in shaping girls' sexuality its not the case always rather social, cultural and economic factors are an important determinant linked with influencing women's sexuality.

Keywords: empowerment, media, sexuality, sexualization, young girls,

Introduction

The influence media has on young girls' (11-18 years old) sexuality is a widely researched topic and has been a theme of interest throughout history. Literature argues that sexualization in the media should be embraced as it is a symbolization of changes and freedom for females and their rights over the years. On the contrary, there are strong debates in the literature today to suggest that there are negative implications associated with sexualization in the media than positive ones. Literature proposes that it is mandatory to provide effective sexuality education for young people.

Historical background

Jackson and Vares (2012) studied the changes of gender roles throughout history and its contribution to how sexuality is characterised today. Prior to the 1990s females had very restrictive boundaries. The patriarchal treatment of females was defied, which ultimately stimulated female independence in hope for gender equality (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011). According to Liss et al., (2011) this established the modern day "girl power" which encourages female sexualization. While, this is thought to be empowering, Jackson and Vares (2012) believe that this is disguised as modern day chauvinism. Literature proposes that media (magazine companies, movies, music videos, modelling agencies and advertisement companies) today has taken full advantage of these changes and used sexuality to attract consumers' attention (Liss et al., 2011). According to research, the narrow representation of female sexuality in the media has had some colossal impacts, such as upholding gender inequality, misrepresentation of gender roles, poor body satisfaction and poor self-esteem in young girls (Yager, 2014). Sexuality is defined in the literature is a term that

embodies a person's beliefs and attitudes towards relationships, gender roles, identity, self-esteem, body image, sexual orientation, pleasure, and reproduction (World Health Organisation, 2010).

Cultural and Socioeconomic determinants

Literature advocates that media is an influential determinant in shaping people's perceptions regarding sexuality. Swami et al. (2009) examined the key determinants that shape peoples' beliefs towards sexuality by studying 37 countries and observing whether different cultures experienced analogous effects as a result of the media. The first determinant was people's socio-economic status (SES) and the second determinant was the degree to which people were exposed to Western media (Swami et al., 2009). People of low SES associated plumpness with wealth, resources and fertility and as a result desired to be full rather than striving for the thin ideal. In the study, Moroccan women of low SES reported that they did not want to lose any weight regardless of being obese (Swami et al., 2009; Chakaborty & De, 2014). The second determinant was the extent to which people were exposed to western media. Swami et al., (2009) displayed that Fijian women who were exposed to western media were more focused on achieving thin ideals than their counterparts who were not exposed to local media. In support of this study, findings indicated people are more likely to conform to the idealisation represented in the media. For example, if magazines advertised voluptuous women to as more prominent then they are more likely to coincide to this idealisation (Swami et al., 2009). These are critical findings as they highlight how powerful media can be in shaping people's attitudes (Chakaborty & De, 2014; Swami et al., 2009).

Studies have indicated that people of Māori descent in New Zealand are not as influenced by the media like European New Zealanders (Curtis & Loomans, 2014). These findings are interesting because usually Māori are exposed to Western media to the same extent European New Zealanders are. Studies have identified that Māori culture and traditions could be a protective factor in regard to shadowing media's beauty expectations (Curtis & Loomans, 2014). Additionally, Māori are often lower in SES, as discussed previously this is a determinant that reduces the desire to achieve these body ideals (Curtis & Loomans, 2014).

Sexualization in the media is empowering

Tolman (2013) and Braid, (2013) claim that the way females are represented in the media today resembles female power, control and freedom of self-expression. Some females reported that they took delight in being sexualised and receiving sexual attention from others as it gave them a sense of control and empowerment over their sexuality (Liss et al., 2011). Theories have suggested that being desired is an essential component of females' sexual arousal and therefore, it is female nature to engage and enjoy sexualised behaviours (Liss et al., 2011). Females also attribute being attractive to being sexualised. This is supported by other studies, which have found that people behave kindly to women who are more attractive than women who are less attractive. Moreover, Liss et al. (2011) found that being sexualised yields a momentary boost in self-esteem and can increase body competence (Liss et al., 2011). Sinclair and Myers (2004) propose that this is because receiving admiration from males can weaken the negative relationship between self-objectification (the process in which people internalise and compare representations in the media with themselves) and self-esteem. However, females who engage in self-sexualised behaviours such as dressing seductively and flirting to receive attention usually have poor self-esteem as their self-worth is primarily dependent on their physical appearance and how others view them (Sinclair & Myer, 2004; Liss et al., 2011). This reinforces that females conform to what is represented in the media (Liss et al., 2011; Sinclair & Myer, 2004). In support of this, Swami et al. (2009) demonstrate that females adjust their eating behaviours to maintain correspondence with partner's ideas on what is attractive (Swami et al., 2009). This also highlights that the media shapes males' expectations regarding female sexuality (Swami et al. 2009). Liss et al. (2011) concluded that although self-sexualising may boost self-esteem momentarily, there are no protective factors found from being sexualised (Liss et al., 2011).

Sexualization in the media is disempowering

On many occasions, the media represents females in a degrading and devaluing manner (Ostini & Hopkins, 2015). Empirical research states that the frequent exposure to degrading and sexualized images unconsciously upholds issues such as gender inequalities, distortion of gender roles, body dissatisfaction, and poor self-esteem (Vares & Jackson, 2015; Liss et al., 2011; Halliwell, Malson, & Tishchner, 2011; Krahe & Krause, 2010; Curtis & Loomans, 2014). Tolman (2012) discusses

that media contributes to the progression of these issues because it acts as a disruption to developing a healthy sexuality. The media neglects to demonstrate healthy and fruitful relationships and often displays males as superior and females as inferior. In other words, females are obliged to obey male's demands in order to be admired. Additionally, media creates the conception that a female's value lies in her appearance and sexual performance (Vares & Jackson, 2015; Dushinsky, 2013; Halliwell et al., 2011; Tolman, 2012; Ey, 2014; Liss et al., 2011; Yager, 2014). Lamb and Peterson (2011) suggest that this is a result of learning through observation and role modeling. Wall (2003) argues that over time the materials that young girls view becomes a fundamental component in shaping their identity and values towards sexuality. A part of the issue is that girls are too young to understand the authentic sense of sexuality and are not being educated on sexuality from any other source; therefore, they imitate what is portrayed in the media as desirable (Dushinsky, 2013). While media is one of the roots of determining beauty standards and sex appeal, young girls also learn about body idealizations and gender roles from their mothers, siblings and peers, which exacerbate consequences (Dion et al, 2016; Curtis & Loomans, 2014).

Vares and Jackson, (2015) propose that media normalises female victimisation and over time it conditions females to tolerate being sexualised and victimised by males which raise many concerns. One of many concerns that Vares and Jackson (2015) discuss in their findings, is that females avoid voicing issues concerning harassment not only because of the stigma surrounding it but also because of the normalising effect ingrained towards sexualisation. For example, what may be a significant issue *i.e. sexual harassment* is now anticipated as a small and insignificant incident due to the normalising approach it is represented in the media (Vares & Jackson, 2015). Ey (2014) study adds weight to these finding as their study demonstrated that children between the ages of 6 to 10 who were exposed to the sexualized videos developed stereotypical attitudes towards gender roles compared to the control group, contributing to maintaining gender inequality and skewed perspectives towards gender roles. Pennell and Morawitz (2015) examined the effects of viewing sexually victimised female characters compared with viewing sexualized female hero characters. Girls who were exposed to sexually victimized female characters blurred their outlooks towards gender roles and gender equality. Girls who were exposed to sexualized heroic characters reduced girl's body satisfaction. However, Pennell and Morawitz (2015) found that girls who viewed

female heroic images increased feelings of body competence. These findings suggest that girls who focused on health and wellbeing found these superheroic female characters were empowering (Pennell & Morawitz, 2015). Schooler et al. (2006) argue that this study was conducted on 18-year-old females and younger girls may not make the connection between appearance and health, and are more likely to be focused on achieving an unrealistic body image using unhealthy methods (Schooler et al., 2006). Schooler et al. (2006) explains that young girls are more vulnerable possibly due to pubertal development. Schooler et al. (2006) enhances her argument and emphasis that during childhood and young adolescence girls view themselves as almost inadequate to achieve this perfect image that society glorifies impacting on their self-esteem when they are constantly exposed to flawless ideals in the media amplifies the negative beliefs towards themselves.

Literature has made it evident that the media can often trigger the process of self-objectification to take place. A study conducted by Haper, Tiggeman and Polivy (2010) highlighted that girls who read magazines and viewed more television programmes were more likely to engage in self-objectification experience from weight concerns, depression and body dissatisfaction (Leask, 2013). Calogero et al. (2005) argue that these issues occur as a result of feeling powerless and in order to control the systemic objectification of their bodies. While some studies argue that this is largely dependent on the extent a person engages in self-objectification and internalization, findings have shown that unconsciously women will engage in these behaviours in situations such as male gazing and even when they are primed to sexually objectifying statements (Halliwell et al., 2011; Tiggeman & Polivy, 2010) Dion et al. (2016) found that girls of from the age of 6 to 10 reported that their ideal body would be one that is underweight, even in underweight participants. Additionally, participants who were concerned with being an ideal weight scored lower on their self-esteem, experienced more depressive and anxiety concerning their weight than participants who were not as focused on an ideal weight, regardless of their BMI (Dion et al., 2016). Halliwell et al. (2011) displayed that the exposure to sexually passive images in the media and sexually agentic images from the media were both associated with increased weight dissatisfaction and increased self-objectification (Halliwell et al., (2011).

Education interventions and Strategies

Literature signifies the necessity for sexuality education from an early age. A vast amount of research identifies that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) can be effective when integrated into the school curriculum. Findings indicate that it can assist in reducing gender inequality; promote healthy gender roles; reduce body dissatisfaction; poor body image; and low self-esteem among girls (Lamb, 2010; Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Sanjakdar et al., 2015; Bilby, 2015). CSE is an empowerment-based framework that educates students on gender roles, relationships, body image and self-esteem, media literacy, critical thinking, good decision-making and effective communication (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2016; New Zealand Herald, 2015).

Currently, the New Zealand Government has made sexuality education in primary and secondary schools compulsory for all students from years 1-10. Although this is a practical policy that New Zealand education systems have adopted, Sanjakdar et al., (2015) argue that there remains to be very little understanding around how sexuality education should be taught. Sanjakdar et al. (2015) discuss that CSE should apply a critical pedagogy approach as it displayed successful outcomes while trialled over New Zealand and Australia (Sanjakdar et al., 2015). Results demonstrated that critical pedagogy encourages children to voice their opinions and concerns in regards to sexuality; children learnt to respect different cultural and religious opinions; students gained understanding about social norms and challenged these concepts; voicing opinions reduced stigma around discussing controversial issues such as sexual harassment, that society chooses place stigma around.

Sanjakdar et al. (2015) examined different pedagogy activities such as discussions, critiquing, role-play, counter-hegemony, praxis and interviews with students. Findings display that these techniques encourage students to challenge sexuality topics. In support of this, Mathew (2015) indicated that critical pedagogy is effective in getting students to critically engage and challenge concepts they view in the media, this is particularly important because many young people look for information online. Moreover, Neustifter, Blumer, O'Reilly and Ramirez (2015) found that CSE helped to reduce children conforming to what they observe in the media, this may be an outcome of critical thinking process taking place. Haberland (2015) agrees that little is known how

to deliver CSE, which disrupts the young people attaining the effective sexuality education that they need. Haberland et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis consisting of behaviour change interventions and CSE that demonstrated interventions that focused more on gender equality and healthy gender roles, was effective in reducing gender inequality in relationships, gender stereotypes in relationships and reduce self-image problems.

While this is out of context, interventions that concentrated on gender roles and gender inequalities also reduced incidents of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies (Haberland, 2015). While the New Zealand Ministry of Education outlines that the topic of gender roles and gender inequalities should be part of sexuality education, in some schools this topic may not be given full attention due to the limited time sexuality education is given (12-15 hours a year) (Haberland, 2015). Literature disputes that this is not enough time to have effective and sustainable impact on young people (Mc Avoy, 2013). Mc Avoy (2013) argues that sexuality education is not given enough time and explains that this is because young people are born into a hyper-sexualized culture and 12-15 hours per year of sexuality education is minimal in relation to the frequent sexualized materials they are exposed to from the media at a very young age (Golan, Hagay & Tamir, 2014; Mora et al., 2015; Jeong, 2012; Lamb, 2010; Espinoza, Penelo & Raich, 2013).

Conclusion

Literature indicates that sexuality in the media resembles female freedom and power, and that this is associated with increasing self-esteem and body competence temporary. Contrary to this, literature also brings to our attention the negative implications associated with media exposure such as gender inequalities, blurred gender roles and body dissatisfaction. Findings suggest the need for effective sexuality education that applies a critical pedagogy approach to moderate these issues.

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Monika has a great passion for breaking down the barriers that preclude equality in our society. She has an abundant passion for empowering people to live positively by taking control of their

situation, reaching their full potential and most importantly loving themselves. Throughout her journey, she has completed a double degree in Psychology and in Health Education from University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Monika has also volunteered for Shakti, Lifeline, Project K and MHAPS, in hope to empower and enable people to truly flourish.



Monika Sargayoos, 2017

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